

**International graduate student retention: A study of international graduate/post graduate students in their 20s and 30s to identify the factors behind staying in or moving from Fredericton upon completion of their studies**

by

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## **Abstract**

The number of international students coming to Canada has been increasing especially in bigger cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. This study aims to understand the reasons why international students in their 20s and 30s choose to stay or relocate from Fredericton to bigger cities in Canada upon completion of studies. The idea behind this study is to evaluate the mismatch between retention rate of international students and the role of various factors such as their age and marital status behind this decision. The primary research question is: Why do international students in their 20s and 30s stay or move away from Fredericton upon completion of their graduate studies? The literature review examines the reasons behind immigration and the experiences of students in bigger as well as lower population areas in Canada and elsewhere. The interview questions examine the career aspirations, family and community related ambitions, impact of local infrastructure, service facilities, and overall expectations of international students to stay or move away from Fredericton. The data collection consists of semi-structured interviews with international students aged between 20-39 years from nine different countries in seven different graduate degree programs. The results indicate a strong relationship exists between the age and the decision to settle in Fredericton. These findings provide key inputs for public policy in Canada and elsewhere on immigrant recruitment and retention.

## **Dedication**

I am highly grateful for the guidance of my supervisors, the participation of international students, and the support from my family.

I thank my supervisor and mentor, Dr. David Foord, for his constant guidance, support, and endless patience towards my numerous queries during the entire duration of this thesis as well as my graduate studies. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work with you as a teaching assistant. This experience helped me to get familiar with research and made me realize that I want to pursue research as my career. I have learned so much under your guidance. I would also like to thank my guide, Dr. Ibrahim Shaikh, for his continuous motivation, belief in me, and insightful comments that were extremely significant for the completion of my research. Thank you for instilling the strong belief in me that I am a capable student. I thank Dr. Maha Tantawy for helping me with my understanding of coding and guiding me through the process. I also thank Angeline Ng and Alex Dandridge for their continuous support throughout the program.

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Additionally, I thank my husband, Jaideep Kumar, for the constant cheering, motivation, being my best friend and my pillar of strength, and standing with me through the thick and thin.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Tables.....	vi
Abbreviations.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review.....	6
3. Research Methodology.....	13
4. Results.....	22
5. Discussion.....	33
6. Conclusion.....	58
7. Future Research.....	63
Bibliography.....	65
Curriculum Vitae	

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Origin and first language

Table 2: Marital and academic status & likeliness to work-from-home

Table 3: Reasons to stay in Fredericton

Table 4: Reasons to move away from Fredericton

Table 5: Decision making factors to stay in Fredericton

## **Abbreviations**

AIP – Atlantic Immigration Program

MBA – Master of Business Administration

MCA – Master of Computer Science

MSc – Master of Science

PNP – Provincial Nomination Program

PR – Permanent Resident

UNB – University of New Brunswick

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Research Design

Figure 2: Reasons for applying to UNB/NBCC

Figure 3: Reasons to not work-from-home

Figure 4: Reasons to work from home

Figure 5: Expectations about community

Figure 6: Community related expectations fulfilled or not

Figure 7: Expectations about weather

Figure 8: Weather related expectations fulfilled or not

Figure 9: Expectations about healthcare

Figure 10: Healthcare related expectations fulfilled or not

Figure 11: Expectations about people

Figure 12: People related expectations fulfilled or not

Figure 13: Discovered ethnic groups in Fredericton

## 1. Introduction

As an international student I have often been part of discussions among students about motivational factors for selecting Fredericton, New Brunswick as the destination for graduate studies and their life plans upon completion of the studies. It was interesting to hear the stark differences of opinion about career and life choices among international students in the younger age group compared to international students with multiple years of work experience. What I heard is that many of the younger international students in UNB Fredericton want to move to big Canadian cities such as Toronto and Vancouver after graduation. This accords with what we know from studies of immigrant retention: 89% of all newcomers settle in large cities, 75% in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal alone (Krahn, Denving, & Laban, 2015). These discussions with fellow international students, the apparent discord between Atlantic Canadian immigration attraction and retention policy and the realities of student mobility after graduation inspired my curiosity to identify the key motivational factors for international students to stay in the city of their studies, Fredericton in this case, or move to larger cities in Canada.

This in turn led me to investigate the factors behind the decisions of international students about where to live after graduation, as well as the governmental policies and programs to attract and retain international students. Although there are studies that try to identify the retention rate based on the gender, degree of education (undergraduate and graduate), tax returns, driving license registrations, and Medicare data (Ramos, 2011; McDonald, Cruickshank, & Liu, 2018; Chira 2013; Ramos & Bennett, 2019; Leonard, McDonald, & Miah, 2019) there is hardly any research to identify the retention factors amongst international graduate students based on their age. To verify that this gap also

exists in public policy, I discussed the topic of immigrant attraction and retention based on age with a senior economist with the Government of New Brunswick's Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (Calhoun, July 5) who confirmed that there is currently no governmental policy on retention of the international students based on age. In other words, there is gap in our knowledge of factors behind immigrant graduate student retention in both the peer reviewed literature and public policy practice.

International students are defined as the students who leave their home country and move to another country for higher education. These can be divided into two groups: a) those students who move internationally for admission to a course/program, and b) those who move abroad for an exchange program (Riano & Piguet, 2016). Canada invites international immigrants through a variety of policies aimed a wide cross-section of migrants coming to Canada on year-on-year basis, with international students constituting the highest number in this overall population numbers in Canada (Sweetman & Warman, 2014). In 2021, Canada had 621,565 international students, of which 73% plan to apply for post-study work permits and 60% plan to apply for the permanent residency (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2022). Atlantic Canada has a lower average number of international students who transition to permanent residency. More than 60% of the international students who transition to permanent residents in Canada are between the ages of 19 and 31 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). The age profile is more heavily weighted towards the younger group in Atlantic Canada, as 50% of the foreign students who transition to permanent residency are aged between 19 and 31. Another nearly 40% are 18 years or younger (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). In addition, international students form a major component of the skilled

labour force in Canada (Akbari, 2015), underscoring the importance to investigate the factors that motivate them to stay in or move from the city of their studies.

The countries that are reliant on immigrants to fill local labour pools, such as Australia, United States, Canada and South Korea, have generally developed high-skilled migration policies, such as work visas or points-based systems to increase the retention rate of the international students (Chand & Tung, 2019). In these countries, students are seen as ideal candidates for immigration as they possess good proficiency in English, desired educational credentials, and experience of working while studying. South Korea, for instance, offers lucrative and competitive scholarships to international students (Istad, Varpahovskis, Miezan, & Ayhan, 2021). Canada has implemented policies to not only attract international students, but also to retain them as the skilled workforce for the economy (Hana, Gulanowskib, & Searsc, 2022). Recent policy changes in Canada have emphasized international student recruitment and retention, making international education a key component of the government's economic strategy (Safdar, Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). These include increases in the number of work hours for the international students, ease in obtaining post-graduation work visas, extension of the work visa period, and expansion of provincial programs for migration, amongst others (Esses, et al., 2018). Still, skilled worker shortages remain in many of these economies. As well, there exists a huge difference in the percentage of immigrants in the skilled workforce in bigger cities versus rural areas of countries such as Canada and Australia (Istad, Varpahovskis, Miezan, & Ayhan, 2021).

The two factors that play an important role in the success of the government policies towards international students are: a) attraction of the international students, and b)

retention of the international students in the host country upon completion of their studies (Nghia, 2015). The topic of attraction has received more attention in both scholarly literature and in public policy practice (Morris-Lange, 2019). Given the lack of prior work on the topic of immigrant retention, especially international student retention based on age criteria and the exploratory nature of the research, I have not used any existing theoretical framework for the study. This study seeks to identify the factors behind retention of the international students, which is a particular concern for smaller cities and regions of the host countries.

More generally, this thesis seeks to contribute to the literature on the topic immigrant student's choice of place. The literature on migration of international students is multidisciplinary and incorporates several factors such as geography, politics, higher education, income opportunities, and international policies as the primary forces behind migration (Clark, 2020). In this study I build on this work to identify factors behind international student retention in places of study, so as to contribute to the ongoing efforts to foster the retention of highly skilled international graduates in provinces traditionally associated with out-migration of youth (Murphy & Finney, 2008). The current efforts and policies of the government are largely umbrella policies. These do not involve the segmentation of the target population based on age or segregate the pull factors according to the cities. This study aims at identifying the factors to stay in a city or move away based on age which can possibly be an important segment for attracting the right candidates to a city.

This thesis begins with a literature review in section 2 on immigration trends, reasons behind immigration, policies adopted by nations for attraction and retention of

international students, and factors that motivate international students to settle in Canada. The next section presents the research methodology, including the research question, research design, selection criteria of the participants for the study, and the approach used for data collection about 26 questions posed to each of the 25 participants. It also includes the analysis of the data collected. Next, section 4 describes the results of the data analysis. These results are categorically presented to provide an understanding of the several factors that play a role in the decision making towards staying or moving away from the city upon completion of the graduate studies. This is followed by discussion in section 5 which correlates the results and all the parameters with the research question. This thesis concludes with an overview of the topic, a summary of the key research findings and suggestions for future avenues (providing the overall gist of the entire research, its analysis, and the suggestions towards the future research).

## 2. Literature Review

It is increasingly becoming common for people to move from one country to another in search of livelihood or better opportunities (Haas, 2018). This process of moving from one place to another is known as migration. Migration is an age-old term that defines the temporary or permanent move of a person (s) from one place to another due to a variety of reasons, including war, conflict, better employment opportunities, discrimination and much else (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). According to the data released by the United Nations, there has been a worldwide increase in the estimated number of the international immigrants. In 2020, international immigration was estimated at 281 million, 108 million more than the 173 million immigrants in 2000 (Migration Data Portal, 2021). Such statistics lead to questions about the reasons behind the increasing numbers of migrants. What, for instance, is the driving force behind this bold decision? This has engendered a broad and vibrant body of research on this complex question (Castles, 2013). In summary, the answer to the broad question involves numerous factors before the ultimate decision to move to a new country.

The decision of migration is a conceptual pairing of the aspiration and ability of an individual (Jong, 2000). Every individual compares the benefits and losses of staying in their home country versus immigrating to the possible destination communities (Fischer, Reiner, & Straubhaar, 1997). Literature divides migration into two categories, voluntary migration (pull towards the destination) and forced migration (push from the origin country) (Kuhnt, 2019). Other research includes economic, natural environment, social-political, demographic, urbanization, and family reunification reasons (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). Scholarship has also distinguished between career and individual advancement

reasons to family/extended family relocation (Suutaria & Brewsterb, 2000; G.Harvey, 223-244; Brett & Stroh, 1995).

Globalization and digitalization have also accelerated the population of immigrants in countries around the world (Czaika & Haas, 2014). The exposure to lifestyles in other countries and increased the awareness amongst a younger generation about the disparities and disadvantages of living in an under-developed or developing economies (Zanabazar, Kho, & Sarantuya, 2021). This has led to a change in the aspirations and dreams of the students to move to a foreign country for studies (Zanabazar, Kho, & Sarantuya, 2021). The number of international students worldwide has increased from 3.9 million in 2011 to 4.8 million in 2016, about 1.7% of the total immigrants in 2020 (Migration Data Portal, 2020).

As with immigrants generally, there are a variety of factors that dominate the decision-making process of immigrant students to stay or relocate from their place of studies. These factors can be divided into several forms of capital: social, economic, cultural, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1980; Gerard & Uebelmesser, 2014). The international exposure provides international students an opportunity to build contacts as future resources and to acquire social capital to be part of an exclusive group. (Brooks & Waters, 2010). Recent studies suggest students' post-study aspirations are emergent and imply that these aspirations are influenced by social networks, both in their home country as well as their host country (Collins, Ishikawa, Ho, & Ma, 2017). Consistent with this finding, others have discovered that international student mobility plans are not necessarily calculated in advance, but are instead emergent and fluid in relation to previous experiences, future aspirations, societal expectations, and social relationships (Prazeresa, et al., 2017).

Symbolic capital that international students carry from back home is also key factor in this decision-making process about their choice of place to stay in the immigrant country (Prazeresa, et al., 2017). This process is also influenced by a comparative analysis students undertake of their location options, with reputation of a place as a key factor in immigrant decisions to relocate (Raghuram, 2012).

Others have characterized the reasons behind international student mobility to study elsewhere to be based on the push and pull factors (Urbański, 2022). Pull factors that attract students towards a country include economic, social, and political factors, such as better employment opportunities, higher standard of living, improved housing facilities, better healthcare facilities, liberal community, and freedom (Czaika & Haas, 2014 ;Zanabazar, Kho, & Sarantuya, 2021). Students from developing countries are pulled by factors such as higher quality of education, knowledge and awareness about an institution's reputation, national prestige, religious tolerance, family reasons, higher income opportunities, and a better standard of living (Sahatcija, Ferhataj, & Ora, 2020; Mihi-Ramirez & Kumpikaite, 2014). The push factors, on the other hand, force the students to migrate from home country. These factors include low salaries, lack of opportunities, unstable political environments, famine or drought, poverty, political corruption, religious fundamentalism or religious intolerance, lack of employment opportunities, and natural disasters (Lin & Kingminghae, 2017). Additionally, personal development, enhanced professional network, international experience, better working conditions and future opportunities impact the decision for students to move to a country for their studies (Kou, Wissen, Dijk , & Bailey, 2015).

As with immigrants more generally, students from developing nations tend to move to developed nations such USA, UK, and Canada for their higher education studies as these nations provide better job opportunities, higher pay scales, and a better quality of life compared to their home countries (Bozionelos, et al., 2014). Indeed, these factors go together, as the degree received in the host country or the country where one plans to move to is considered as a pathway towards finding a job after the graduation and thereafter residency in the host nation (Hercog & Laar, 2016). The decision to study abroad is generally based of several factors including self-determined motivation (Chirkov, Safdar, Guzman, & Playford, 2008). Students are attracted to study-stay abroad and although the academic qualification holds importance, the prime objective is the sensory and cultural experience of being in another place/country, different climate, historical legacy, recreational opportunities, and new opportunities for social encounters (King & Sodhi, 2017). More specifically, the choice of place of study of students in developing countries has been examined in regional studies. Amongst Chinese students, the course description, credibility of the institution, recommendation from friends and family, ease of admission, low costs of living, perceived job market opportunities and options upon completion of studies are the key motivators to enroll in a program at a foreign country (Istad, Varpahovskis, Miezan, & Ayhan, 2021). Amongst the African students, international exposure, opportunities upon completion of studies, and academic reputation are the deciding factors (Maringe & Steve , 2007).

In addition to student motivation, student immigrant is also supported by host countries such as Australia and Canada that adopt strategies for improving the supply of highly qualified human capital into their domestic labour markets (King & Sodhi, 2017).

These public policies are particularly important as one the deciding factors for international students to stay in the host country is the possibility and ease in obtaining permanent residency status (Farivar, Coffey, & Cameron, 2019). Unlike the earlier trend in the 1990s when most international students chose United States, United Kingdom and Australia as their preferred nation of studies (Ammigan & Jones, 2018), international students are now opting for Canada, United States, and United Kingdom as their first choice (Hurley, Hildebrandt , & Brisbane, 2021).

Canada is attractive to international students because of its high-quality education system and its international reputation as a safe country that promotes tolerance and cultural diversity (Netierman, et al., 2022). The concentration of international students in Canada is evident in its three largest cities, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Bonikowska, Hou, & Picot, 2017). The citizenship and immigration policies along with the future aspirations of a well-paying job and housing opportunities in Canada impact the decision of these international students to move to Canada (Al-Haque, 2017). Also, changes in the immigration programs play an important role in attracting international immigrant students to lesser popular provinces, such as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia (Bonikowska, Hou, & Picot, 2017).

The policies of the Government of Canada for the post-study work permit and permanent residency emphasize the recruitment and retention of international students, suggesting that students in all age-groups are an integral part of economic strategies (Scott, Safdar, Trilokekar, & Masri, 2015). This has led to a surge of international students in Canada (Gopal, 2016) with more than 30,000 graduate international students in the age group of 30-40 years were enrolled in Canada and around 170,000 graduate students in the

age group of 20-30 years (Statista, 2022). As per a study published by the Canadian Bureau of International Education (2022), the number of international students in Canada has increased from 142,170 in 2010 to 388,782 in 2020, an increase of approximately 173%. Of the total international students landing in Canada, around 47% of the international students' study in Ontario, 22% in British Columbia, 15% in Quebec, and less than 5% in each of the other provinces (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2022).

Many studies have shown that the location to settle is directly related to the economic and the housing needs, cultural environment, and social factors (Newbold, 2017). One of the primary reasons for immigrant settlement in large cities is the existence of well-established ethnic communities (Krahn, Denving, & Laban, 2015). However, this is just one of the many factors. The decision to settle in a city upon completion of studies, just like selecting the university or college for their studies, is dependent of several factors as well as the challenges faced by the international students. These include the pressure to succeed, cultural differences, financial issues, and coping with change (Calder, et al., 2016). Securing good quality, affordable and suitable housing is a key element of the immigration integration (Teixeira, 2014). Indeed, purchasing a home is as a lifetime and financial achievement that anchors individuals to the cities (Thomas, A, 2016).

Immigrant retention has been lesser populated regions is both an understudied and a persistent problem (Marc Frenette, 2018). Even though few smaller cities and towns tend to offer higher incomes than the above-mentioned top tier cities, a larger section of the international students prefer bigger cities over the small towns (Flynn & Bauder , 2014). As with the more general literature on immigration, the literature on immigrant location selection is influenced by economic and housing needs, personal preferences, and social as

well as the cultural environments (Smith, 2001). In the case of Atlantic Canada, while it has emerged as destination for the international students (Siddiq, Nethercote, Lye, & Baroni, 2012), only 2.5% of the international immigrants settle in Atlantic Canada (Thomas A. , 2016). This number has remained low, even though smaller cities have a lot to offer, such as friendliness of local people in general, natural environment, low key lifestyle, safe environment, and low cost of living (Hanson & Barber, 2011).

Immigrant retention is further complicated by Covid. In the last two years, Covid has however reduced the distance between the cities for work purposes with the onset of digitalization and work-from-home opportunities. It has also impacted the attraction and retention of international students (Buckner, Zhang, & Blanco, 2021). And yet, we know that Canada, Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal have remained the top destinations for the international students, even though there may be distance-work opportunities in areas without the associated high price of accommodation (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021).

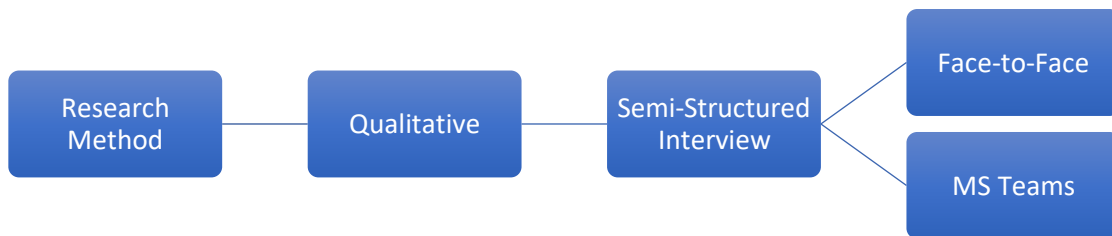
In summary, while studies have been conducted to identify the key factors behind attraction and retention of the international students, there is little research on the decision of international students to stay or move away from a city upon completion of the graduate studies. Given the pressing public policy issues with immigrant attraction and retention in smaller regions and cities/provinces, there is a need for more research to understand this gap. The thesis aims to identify the factors that encourage graduate students to continue staying in the city of studies or move to a different city.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative methodology to undertake explorative research in the gap identified in the previous section. Exploratory research is not designed to test a hypothesis or solve a practical problem, but rather to venture into a territory that has not been vastly explored (Yeation, Langenbrunner, Smyth, & Paul, 1995). Interviews were conducted for data collection to venture into the decision-making factors and answer the research question. This method of data collection has been commonly used as a research technique for exploring the human behavior (McKechnie, Baker, Greenwood, & Julien, 2002). Interviews are the most used method for primary used data collection (Taylor, 2005) and the semi-structured format of interviewing the participants is the most frequently used interview technique (Wengraf, 2001). A benefit of this approach is that semi-structured interviews allow reciprocity between the interviewer and the participant, thereby providing an opportunity to develop rich understanding of the study topic (Rabionet, 2011).

Figure 1: Research Design



An inductive methodology was applied to the qualitative data collected for the study as shown in figure (1). The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in

raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. The main purpose behind usage of the inductive approach can be any of the following (Thomas D. R., 2006):

1. To condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format.
2. To establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure that these links are both transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research); and
3. To develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data.

This methodology was applied to the current study as there currently exists insufficient literature on the decision-making factors for staying in a city upon completion of the graduate studies based on the age factor. This provided an opportunity to utilize the inductive approach for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing the captured qualitative data to identify the factors for answering the research question.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the months of April and May, 2022. An interview guide was prepared with an exhaustive list 26 questions to gather responses from the participants to explore the research topic. These questions were divided into five sections to gather inputs about the demography, studies in Fredericton, career plans, life plans, and experiences in as well as expectations from Fredericton.

The invitations were sent to more than 100 students studying in the University of New Brunswick, St. Thomas University and New Brunswick Community College. The

invitations included a brief about the subject of the thesis and a consent form. A total of 33 students responded with their consent to participate in the city and inputs of 25 students were considered for the thesis.

Of the total interviews, 21 interviews were conducted via MS-teams and transcripts were recorded and 4 interviews were conducted face to face in the UNB library or houses of the participants at a time convenient to them. All the relevant UNB ethics guidelines were followed throughout the interview process, beginning from request to the candidate for the interview to capturing, using and retaining the information. Before starting the interview, all the participants were informed that an approval has been received from the ethics committee for conducting the study. They were informed that their identity will be protected, they have a right to withdraw from the study at any time, and they have the right to refuse to answer the questions which they would feel uncomfortable. Each face-to-face interview was audio-recorded/manually captured in a MS-Word document. Interviews lasted for an average of one-and-half to two hours. For each interview conducted via MS-Teams, transcripts were recorded, and each interview lasted for an average of an hour. These transcripts and audio recordings were later used to incorporate the data in an excel sheet for further coding and review.

### **3.3 Selection Criteria**

The selection criteria for interview participants were formulated in light of the focus on international graduate students. In this study, only graduate students falling in the age bracket of 20-29 years and 30-39 years could participate, given the research question about the deciding factors to stay in or move away from Fredericton for students in these age

groups. There were a few other criteria that were considered. To be a participant in the study, a student:

- a. should be a current or recent graduate student at a college/university in Fredericton;
- b. should be an international student and proficient in English;
- c. should be studying on a study permit; and
- d. should not be a PR holder.

### 3.4 Research Participants

A total of 25 graduate students of UNB and NBCC (1) were interviewed for the study. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a conscious attempt was made to include as much geographical and program diversity as possible to ensure inputs were received from students from different countries around the world. This was done to assess if first language and existence of community members in the city had any impact on the answers to any of the questions in the interview guideline. An effort was made to interview the same number of students in both the age groups. Of the total, 12 students were in the age group of 20-29 and 13 were in the age group of 30-39. The following table provides other details about the participants.

Table 1: Origin and first language

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>First Language</b>
Nigeria	5	Yoruba & English
Azerbaijan	1	Azeri
Brazil	1	Portuguese
Chile	1	Spanish
China	1	Mandarin

India	4	Hindi
India (Gujarat)	1	Gujarati
India (Orissa)	1	Oriya
India (Maharashtra)	4	Marathi
India (Punjab)	2	Punjabi
India (Uttarakhand)	1	Garhwali
Kuwait	1	Hindi
Republic of Mauritius	1	Mauritian Creole
Vietnam	1	Vietnamese

### 3.5 Semi-Structured Interview

The entire set of 26 questions was divided into five categories.

1. Demographics: Of the many demographic details that can be captured about a participant, for this study details about age, country or origin, and year of arrival in Canada were recorded. As the research questions aims at identifying the decision-making factors based on age to stay in Fredericton or not, it was important to establish the context for their international student status and their current age. Additionally, the year of arrival was asked to ensure that few months have been spent in Fredericton to know the city and understand the available facilities as well as the opportunities. As part of the study, it was necessary to capture the basic information about each of the interviewees to establish a link between country of origin, dependability on others (family and friends) based on age, and the year of arrival in Canada. The country of origin helped in understanding the existence in Fredericton of community from the student's home country. In other words, were there people in Fredericton from their community and was this a factor in retention? If there was a diaspora in Fredericton, was it easy to find people from their country and community? Given that age is a core criterion that is being examined in the

thesis, it was included in the questionnaire. The date of arrival was part of the questions to judge if students had experienced the city for a couple of months before deciding to stay or move away upon completion of the studies. The students selected for the study had different demographic profiles, but no question about race was asked as it seemed to be an inappropriate question for the study.

2. Higher Education Selection: This section had questions about the reasons behind selection criteria for the specific program at the student's college or university, as well as the planned graduation date and plans about career. These questions were asked with an intention to understand the primary aim of the students, motives behind selecting the college or university in Fredericton. Was it done intentionally in alignment with the immigration programs in the Atlantic Canada? Was it selected only because of the program and the credentials of the college or university and its professors? Was it based on the institution's admission process? This clarity was required to understand the motivational factors and plans of the students from the initial process of moving to Canada.

3. Life Plans

This set of questions on life plans aimed at obtaining insights about the dreams and aspirations of the students upon completion of their studies. Their plans of life with family, their marital status, and settling down at a place were discussed. These insights were captured to establish the link between their marital status,

requirements of the family, family ties and their plan to stay in or move away from Fredericton.

#### 4. Career Plans

This section had questions about the job aspirations, job applications, whether students have received any job offers or if they have applied to jobs or not. The questions sought to uncover whether this was a primary reason for staying or moving. Most of the students stated that they plan to start or continue their career upon completion of their studies, and this involves considering location around the kind of job they want or kind of business they want to start. Given that Covid has changed the way professional work is managed and to understand the readiness of students to stay in Fredericton if a work-from-home option was provided to them, a question was asked about work-from-home readiness.

#### 5. Fredericton Experience and Expectations

When an international student comes to a new city, they interact with fellow batchmates, faculty, and local community members. It is a possibility that they will look for people from their own ethnic group and community. These factors can play an important role in the decision to stay in a city or not, hence these were included in the questionnaire. Also, questions were asked about the motivational factors to stay in Fredericton, likes and dislikes about the city, aspirational city for settling down, and expectations from Fredericton.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a difficult and crucial aspect of qualitative research (Basit, 2003). After collection of the data, coding is one of the next most important steps for the analysis to make meaningful conclusions from the entire data (Basit, 2003). Initial preparation of the data for analysis included organizing and transcribing the entire interview data. After reading the transcripts, I highlighted the answers to questions and transferred the same to the master excel sheet. I subsequently created a single tab to record answers for each participant. Each question category had a separate row for the responses from the participants. I tried to transcribe each interview right after it in case I decided to send follow-up emails requesting further clarifications or elaboration on some point.

I went through the concepts, kinds, and methods of coding provided by Saldana (2009). The entire data was first broken down into smaller discrete parts and analyzed in detail, and then the codes were established for the entire data set. I reviewed all the codes and combined all related codes into one to reduce the number of codes for a more meaningful analysis. The entire data set was reviewed, coded, and divided into five specific categories for analysis:

1. Demographics;
2. Why Fredericton for graduate studies;
3. Life plans before coming to Fredericton and for future.
4. Career plans; and
5. Fredericton experience and expectations.

Upon completion of the coding and division of the interview data into these categories, a scheme was developed to filter the factors behind the motivation to stay in or move away from Fredericton. The entire analysis was further refined by reviewing the gaps, reducing the excess categories, and finally grouping the results to identify the behavioral pattern of the graduate students based on the age group.

## 4. Results

In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented. The information received from all the participants in all the categories has been included. For easy understanding, the entire results have been divided into the five categories as suggested in the methodology section.

### **Demographics**

The 25 students who were interviewed for the study came from nine different countries. 12 (48%) of the students were in the 30-39 age group and 13 (52%) in the 20-29 age group. Of the total 25 students, 13 students were from different provinces in India, 5 from Nigeria, the remaining 7 students were each from Azerbaijan, Brazil, Chile, China, Vietnam, Kuwait, and Republic of Mauritius. These students had 13 different languages as their first language, suggesting the diversity in the international students. An effort was put to reach out to students from countries other than India and Nigeria, given that the majority of the international students are from these two countries. Also, of the 25 students, only 2 students had English as first language.

These students were enrolled in seven different programs. These programs were Master of Applied Cybersecurity, Master of Science in Forestry, Master's in Technology and Entrepreneurship, Master of Business Administration, Master of Computer Applications, Business Analytics, and Master of Science in Environment management. Apart from the program that students are enrolled in, to understand the impact of partner's preferences and say in the life of an international student, information about the marital status or co-habitation was also captured. Amongst the students, nine were married students, 4 were single but committed and remaining 12 were single.

These inputs were included in the questions to identify if any relationship existed between the home country, program taken at the university, and the community that they would meet in Fredericton. As the number of students from India and Nigeria were higher than for other interviewees, it was an assumption that they were more likely to meet people from their home country as it seemed that people from these two nations were living in the city

### **Education**

This section included details about the reasons for selecting their college or university and the program, their graduation date, and their plans upon completion of the program. Of all the inputs collected in this section, the most important element was to understand the reasons behind opting to study in Fredericton and the plan of the students upon completion of their program. All of the 25 students were asked to provide up to three reasons for coming to Fredericton for their studies. Easy access to permanent residency through the provincial nomination program (PNP) and the Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP) was the most common answer. The second reason was the low fees of the University of New Brunswick and the New Brunswick Community College. The third reason was recommendation of the University by family and friends, which ultimately led to the first reason of easy access to PR.

## Career Plans

Digitalization and technology have made it possible for people to stay in one corner of the world and work for an organization situated in another part of the world. Also, with opportunities available in several sectors, students desire to work in a field of work that inspires them. The availability of such opportunities whether online or in person in Fredericton play an important role in deciding to stay in or move away from Fredericton upon completion of the studies.

This section presents the results from the questions on aspirations of the students with respect to the desired job, whether they have applied to any jobs and received any offers yet. The views of students about opting for the work-from-home option, if offered, and staying back in Fredericton are also captured.

Table 2: Marital and academic status & likeliness to work-from-home

Age	Partner	Job Aspiration	Studies	Work-from-home
28	Single	Cybersecurity	MSc in Cybersecurity	Yes
29	Single	Cybersecurity	MSc in Forestry	No
25	Single	General	MSc in Forestry	No
39	Single	Telecommunication	MTME	Yes
29	Single	Banking	MBA	No
28	Single	Data Analytics	MBA	No
31	Married	Data Analytics	MBA	No
25	Single	Digital Marketing	MBA	No
37	Single	Finance/Insurance	MBA	No
29	Committed	General	MBA	No
31	Married	General	MBA	Yes
33	Single	Information Technology	MBA	No
26	Single	General	MBA	No
35	Single	Policy Administration	MBA	Yes
33	Married	Project Management	MBA	Yes
34	Married	Project Management	MBA	No
36	Married	Project Management	MBA	Yes
36	Married	General	MBA	Yes

32	Married	Robotics & Automation	MBA	Yes
25	Committed	Venture Creation	MBA	Yes
25	Committed	General	MCA	Yes
24	Single	Information Technology	MCA	No
32	Married	Information Technology	MCA	No
24	Single	Environment Monitoring	MSc in Env Mgmt	No
29	Married	Product manager	PGC-IT	Yes

Of the 25 students, 14 students did not want to opt for the work-from-home option. After spending two years in isolation, the students were keen upon a job opportunity that provided them with an option of social networking, travelling, and going out of the house. The students who were willing to work-from-home with an organization in Fredericton or with an organization outside of Fredericton were mainly in the 30s age group. Additionally, the students willing to work remotely and stay in Fredericton were married. They considered the work-from-home job option as an opportunity to earn money and spend more time with family, participate in the duties at home, and contribute towards upbringing of the children. They said that Fredericton is a great place for raising children due to education facilities and natural environment. The most common reason stated by the students for working-from-home was economic benefits. They looked at it as an option to save the money spent on gas and taxi fare, as well as an opportunity to save the time spent in traffic. The students also saw it as a chance to stay in Fredericton and not moving to an Atlantic Canadian city until they receive their PR. The students who did not want to opt for the work-from-home option did so on the assumption that it restricts the opportunities of professional development, networking, and working-from-home in Fredericton will make for a lonelier life.

The interviewees were asked to share their opinions about the current job opportunities in Fredericton and their career aspirations. Many students in their late 20s

and 30s stated that their chances of staying back in Fredericton will be higher if they receive a job offer at an acceptable pay-scale in their field of interest. However, if they did not find the job then they would move to a city providing the jobs in interest.

### **Expectations and Experiences in Fredericton**

The sections address the expectations of the international graduate students towards community, healthcare, weather, and people and presents their expectations before arrival in Fredericton.

Of the total 25 students, the expectation about community were not met for 10 students and 7 had no expectations. The expectations related to interactions with local people were met with disappointment by 17 students, close to 70% of study group. In short, the city was not what they had expected, and the people were not as friendly and welcoming as they had assumed them to be.

However, around 90% of the students had no difficulty in finding people from their ethnic group. The university, religious places, and the social media played a big role in helping them find the people from similar ethnic groups. Most of the students from India and Nigeria were able to find people from their own communities, but students from Vietnam, Mauritius, and Azerbaijan did not. The student from Azerbaijan said that it was only after few months of his arrival in Fredericton that he came across another person from his county. The student from Mauritius could not find any other student from her own country even after being in Fredericton for a couple of years. She had come to Fredericton for her undergraduate studies and subsequently entered a master's degree at UNB. However, she said it was easy to make friends from other communities.

Regarding healthcare in Fredericton, 17 people felt disappointed. This disappointment included the interaction with the government employees at Service New Brunswick while trying to get the Medicare card and experience at the emergency room of the hospital. A married female student in her 30s shared an incident about her experience at a local healthcare facility. "One day I woke up and saw a boil on my forearm. I assumed that it might have happened during cooking, but within hours the problem augmented, and the entire forearm swelled as if it will burst. I was in a lot of pain and my husband took me to the emergency room around noon. I told the nurse about my problem, showed my hand, and shared that pain was unbearable but it took them eight hours to address to my problem. It was a horrible experience." Another student shared an incident about his friend. "My friend suffered a fracture in his toe while at work. He was given a leave from work but had to spend hours at the emergency room to be looked at, even X-ray took hours".

With respect to weather, people had expected harsh winters, but were positively surprised with the heating system in the houses. A few of the interview subjects said they enjoyed their first winters, and the only thing that they disliked about winters was the snow removal.

The transportation system in Fredericton was a subject of common criticism from international students. One student said that a major portion of her salary goes into taxi fare. She also stated she finds it difficult to manage her daily schedule due to the limited bus schedules and times of to her classes and part time job. Moreover, the lack of bus service on Sundays and holidays was identified as a problem. A student in his 20s spoke about having to walk miles in the late evening as he did not have enough money for the taxi and bus service was not available in the night. Additionally, he said that he and his

friends do not have a private vehicle and the hour-long gap between the service in the evenings deters them from planning impromptu trips to the mall or across the city.

One significant difference between the students in their 20s and 30s was the initial preparatory research. The students in 30s were more aware about the infrastructure and facilities, whereas students in 20s came with a mindset of exploring the conditions upon arrival. Most of the students in their 20s had high expectations of Fredericton in terms of people and community. These students in their 20s had assumptions that the community and lifestyle in Fredericton would be similar to that in bigger cities such as Toronto and Vancouver. They did not expect much from the weather as they thought Canada has harsh winters. The expectations were very high for the healthcare facilities, and they expected the facilities to be the best with immediate attention, if required, and free of cost.

On the other hand, the students in 30s did research on Fredericton in advance of travelling to Canada and were more aware of the culture and initial things to do around health care benefits and banking facilities. They were easily able to connect with people from their community through social media platforms. Interview subjects in their 30s were more likely to say that people in Fredericton were friendly and welcoming. However, there were a few exceptions, as some of the students faced racial discrimination. Although students in their 30s were more aware of what to expect with the Canadian healthcare system, their experience with healthcare facilities was not satisfactory, especially of the student with a genetic condition.

When asked about their decision based on their experiences and the opportunities, if the students will stay in Fredericton or not, 12 students responded positively. Of these, seven students were from the 30s age group and five from the 20s age group. Of these

seven students in their 30s, five were married, one was single but in a committed relationship and one was single who wanted to stay in the city for the venture creation and entrepreneurship programs of the government. The following table provides information about the reasons for staying in Fredericton. Each student who planned to or wanted to stay provided up to two reasons and most common reason was the balanced personal and professional life. The second reason was family and friends followed by the entrepreneurship program.

Table 3: Reasons to stay in Fredericton

<b>Age</b>	<b>Stay</b>	<b>Reason 1</b>	<b>Reason 2</b>
31	Yes	Job offer received	
36	Yes	Balanced personal & professional life	Entrepreneurship opportunities
36	Yes	Stay till PR	
24	Yes	Friends and family	
35	Yes	Friends and family	
34	Yes	Spouse job	Affordable city
28	Yes	Professional opportunities	
25	Yes	Entrepreneurship program	
33	Yes	Balanced personal & professional life	
32	Yes	Balanced personal & professional life	Entrepreneurship opportunities
29	Yes	Affordable city	
25	Yes	Professional opportunities	

13 students did not intend on staying in Fredericton and the majority of these students were in their 20s. Of the reasons shared by the students for not staying, lack of job opportunities in their area of work, lack of social events, and moving to city in which they had family and friends were most common.

Table 4: Reasons to move away from Fredericton

Age	Stay	Reason 1	Reason 2	Reason 3
37	No	High taxes	Lack of job opportunities	Lack of social events
29	No	Healthcare is fragile	Transportation system is weak	
28	No	Lack of job opportunities		
33	No	Move to bigger city	Lack of social events	
32	No	Low pay scale	Healthcare is fragile	
31	No	Healthcare is fragile		
26	No	Move to bigger city	Move to city of family & friends	
24	No	Lack of job opportunities		
29	No	Low pay scale	Lack of job opportunities	
25	No	Lack of job opportunities	Low pay scale	
29	No	Lack of job opportunities	Move to bigger city	
25	No	Small city	Move to city of family & friends	Lack of social events
39	No	Lack of job opportunities	Lack of social events	

Amongst all students who said they planned to leave Fredericton after graduation, the most popular cities to move to were Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary Ottawa, Halifax, and Moncton. The primary reason provided by the students to move away was for the job opportunities. The other factors were the fragile healthcare, weak transportation system, and dull social life.

Apart from the reasons to move, hypothetical motivating factors to stay in Fredericton were also collected (versus actual motivating factors in Table 3). Each student provided up to three reasons that can positively contribute towards their decision of staying in the city. The topmost factor was better job opportunities, followed by effective healthcare facilities, improved social and nightlife, and better transportation facilities. The other factors with lesser responses were finding a partner, job for spouse, and lower taxes.

For students in their 20s, the factors were more about networking opportunities and improved infrastructure, whereas the students in their 30s were more focused on career opportunities, family well-being with better healthcare, and housing support. The married students in their 30s were very keen on buying a house as soon as possible for their family and housing support from government was identified as a motivation to stay in Fredericton after getting PR.

Table 5: Decision making factors to stay in Fredericton

<b>Age</b>	<b>Reason 1</b>	<b>Reason 2</b>	<b>Reason 3</b>
37	Find a partner	Better pay-scale	Housing support
29	Better pay-scale	Effective healthcare	Social life
32	Effective healthcare	Better pay-scale	Lower taxes
31	Effective healthcare	Lower taxes	Housing support
34	Better job opportunities	Effective healthcare	Housing support
26	Better transportation	Better job opportunities	Social life
25	Better job opportunities	Lower taxes	Better transportation
29	Better job opportunities	Better transportation	Effective healthcare
25	Better job opportunities	Effective healthcare	Better transportation
39	Better pay-scale	Social life	Housing support
25	Career growth	Housing support	Effective healthcare
24	Better pay-scale	Life partner	Social life
24	Social life	Better job opportunities	
36	Better job opportunities	Job opportunities for spouse	
36	Better job opportunities	Effective healthcare	
33	Find a partner	Better job opportunities	
32	Better job opportunities	Better transportation	
25	Better pay-scale	Housing support	
29	Life partner joins	Housing support	
28	Better pay-scale	Housing support	
35	Better job opportunities	Social life	
28	Better job opportunities	Social life	
29	Better job opportunities		
31	I plan to stay		
33	I plan to stay		

In addition to the factors listed in Table 5, the two commonly liked factors identified in the interviews were the peaceful and calm environment of Fredericton (ranked highest

by 40% of interview subjects) followed its affordability for residents (ranked highest by 20%). On the other hand, the most identified negative factors were the transportation (ranked lowest by 25%) and healthcare facilities (ranked lowest by 23%).

## 5. Discussion

In this section, I present the analysis of the results shared in the tables above. This study largely addresses about retention of the graduate/post-graduate students in the city of Fredericton and not the province of New Brunswick. The University of New Brunswick and New Brunswick Community College in Fredericton seem to play an important role in attracting international students. During interviews it was discovered that majority of the students in their 30s chose studying in the city as a path to permanent residency and showed interest in staying in the city. The intention of staying in Fredericton was, however, lower in the students in their 20s as compared to the students in the 30s.

Many of the aspects of Fredericton appealed to the mature and married students. These aspects or pulling factors were closeness to nature, peaceful environment, balanced professional and personal life. It appeared from the interviews to be a great city for raising a family and hence, many of the students wanted to stay after completion of their studies. It has been evident in the past that pursuit of an international degree is often a part of the larger plan to migrate to the host country, which includes strategic family plans (Fong, 2011). One of the MBA students interviewed said: “I have travelled to different countries, and I decided to come to Canada because of the standard of living it offers. My wife and I want to be in a place where we can raise our son in a peaceful environment with good facilities. Fredericton provides everything that we are looking for, except for healthcare facilities, although I’ve heard that it is the case across Canada. Hence, I have decided that I will continue staying in Fredericton. However, that is also dependent on the fact that I get a good job upon completion of my MBA.”

On the other hand, younger single students felt that Fredericton is not a suitable city for them. A majority of students in their 20s planned to move out of Fredericton upon completion of their studies. Amongst the many reasons, or the push factors, was a dull social life, lack of job opportunities, and a smaller number of social events. These students were looking for a life full of new adventures and excitement, which included a lively social culture with potential of dating. For them, Fredericton did not provide these opportunities and the night life was not as exciting as they had perceived. During interviews, they suggested that number of pubs and clubs is way low than a metropolitan city offers. The interview subjects said the prices at pubs and clubs were not student friendly and they closed early in the night. One student in their 20s said they wanted to live a carefree life as this is the time when they do not have any responsibilities of managing homes, taking care of the family, or being accountable to someone. They considered this as an opportunity to explore life, meet people from different cultures, and make new friends as compared to people who are committed, engaged, married, or co-habiting. Another student in his 20s said “I am too young to think about settling down in a city. I want to explore Canada, travel to different cities, meet people, before even thinking about staying in a city for the long-term. That will happen when I am in a relationship and my partner (at that time) and I will decide about it together”.

Discrimination was also factor cited by students in their 20s. Indeed, it can become as one of the most important deciding factors for international students. Friendships with the local students can promote the sense of belongingness amongst the international students in the host city (Chira, 2013). Alternatively, negative experience can be a factor

to move away. Students in their 20s reported a lack of sense of belonging due to discrimination incidents.

## **Demographics**

Demographic characteristics play a vital role for graduate students investigating their opportunities before deciding upon an institution for their studies. These characteristics include age, gender, citizenship, and marital status, amongst others (Lei & Chuang, 2010). To understand the role played by these factors, five questions were asked about country of origin, first language, age, date of arrival in Canada, and marital status.

Country and first language are the basis that initially help in establishing a bond with the people in a new city or country. The existence of people from a particular country in Fredericton will initially influence the level of comfort of being around familiar people to the students in the initial adjustments to a new city. This was confirmed in the interviews: students said that although they want to become familiar with people from other than their communities, they ultimately look for people from own community to celebrate their festivals and cultural events. To that end, students from India and Nigeria suggested that it was relatively easy for them to find people from their own community. On this point, a student in his 20s said “I came to Canada from India with an aspiration to meet people from across the world and hopefully find the girl of my dreams. I dated girls from different countries, but eventually I partnered with a girl from my own country as we have a lot of commonalities and it is much easier to communicate, understand each other, and kind of feels like home”.

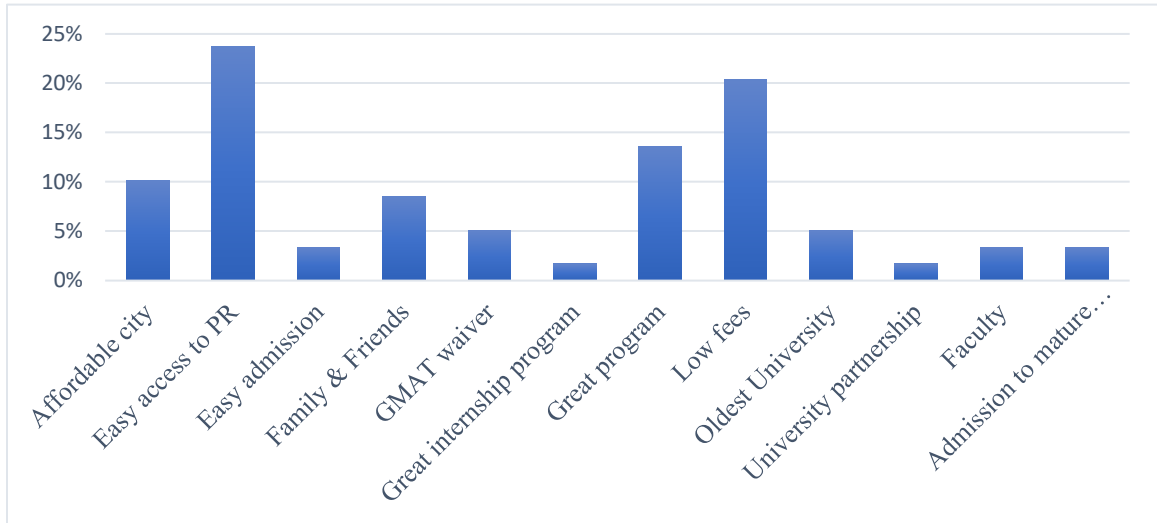
As mentioned above, 20-something and 30-something respondents differed in their responses to my questions. Those in their 30s were more inclined towards finalizing a place to call home with their partners and kids, as compared to the students in their 20s who were more inclined towards exploring life, places, and gain some experience before making the decision. Another important factor related to the age that was discovered as an important contributor to the decision making was the marital/co-habiting status. Most of the students in their 30s were either married or co-habiting and they were more interested in living a stable life with family. Only few students in their 20s were in a relationship. Those were who said that prior to moving, they would have to discuss plans to move to a new city with their partners.

## **Education**

While answering the questions around decision to stay abroad, every student stated that it took them few months to finalize the country and college. It took them time to finalize the financial requirements, arranging funds through loans or savings or sponsorship, etc. Clearly, it was not an overnight decision. In fact, a lot of discussion and research was put into it before opting to stay or move away.

The selection of the education institution is the first step towards entering a new city or country and the selection criteria are very important to understand. The Figure 2 below shows the reasons behind selection of UNB and NBCC by the graduate students as their education destination.

Figure 2: Reasons for applying to UNB/NBC



This question asked each student to provide up to three reasons for selecting the university or college in Fredericton. The idea was to understand if students had come to the city with any prior research of continuing their stay in the city or not. It was clear from the responses that the current policies such as Atlantic Immigration Program acted a motivator to come to Atlantic Canada, followed by the low fees and quality of the program. I have discussed below the answers to this question and the insights it provides for student planning after studies and retention.

#### *Gateway to Permanent Residency*

The topmost reason shared by the students for applying to UNB or NBCC, with a total of 14 (24%) responses out of 59, was the easy access to permanent residency in New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada. After receiving the post graduate work permit, it is common for the international students to apply for permanent residency through federal and provincial programs in Canada (Dam, Chan, & Wayland, 2018). A total of 21 (84%) of the students came to study in Fredericton with the pre-decided mindset of applying for

permanent residency upon completion of their studies. This intention was to study and gain work experience as part time workers in Canada and become proficient in English (or one of the official languages), making them desirable candidates for permanent residency (Dam, Chan, & Wayland, 2018). This was reflective in their reasons for opting UNB/NBCC as choice of place for their studies. Amongst the 14 students who stated permanent residency opportunities as the primary reason for coming to the city, 9 students were in the 30s, 3 in their late 20s and 2 were aged 24 and 25. Another important fact was that 9 out of these 14 students were married. These students shared that they came to Canada with the long-term plan of staying in the country after attaining permanent residency upon completion of their studies. Two of the students were not able to receive permanent residency through the IRCC program, and instead opted for studies in Fredericton as a means to acquire passage to permanent residency (as an applicant receives higher marks in the immigration point system if they have received an education in Canada). These nine students who were married at the time of coming to Fredericton were already aware of the process and shared their liking towards the city after spending months/years during their studies. A 37-year-old single student from Nigeria said, “I opted for UNB because New Brunswick offers better programs towards permanent residency, and it is an affordable province as compared to others. If I find a partner, then I might as well settle in the city because it is a great place to raise family”. This statement was captured during the interview, and it re-iterates the hypothesis that affordability is an element considered while deciding to stay in or move from a city. Another married student in his 30s from India shared, “I wanted to move to Canada and taking an admission seemed like the easiest option as it would add value to my resume and provide me with an

opportunity to attain permanent residency, easily. My wife and I had been thinking of moving to a peaceful city as we lived in a metropolitan in India and it was extremely hectic.”

### *Low Fees*

The choice of education institution is not strongly influenced by the fees charged for the program (Ancheh, Krishnan, & Nurtjahja , 2007). Rather, it is one of the deciding factors. Additionally, the overall expense of staying in the city of the institution for the time of the program is also considered by the international students (Quigley Jr., Bingham Jr., Murray, & Notarantonio, 1999). It was visible in the interviews that a lower cost of living and lower fees structure of the higher education institution was amongst the key decision-making factors for the students. When combined, these two factors totaled to 30%, which means that of the total 59 total reasons, 17 were affordable city and low fees of the institution. This was borne out by the fact that UNB and NBCC programs are cost effective as compared to other higher educational institutions in Canada (Statista, 2022). Students in their 30s were found to be more often using their savings to pay for the fees, and hence were particularly focused on an overall low fee structure. A number of the 20-something students from India said that their parents were sponsoring their education. However, the low fee structure was still a selection criteria. A number of students shared that they had used part-time job in the city to help pay higher education fees.

### *Curriculum and Program of the Institution*

The MBA, MCA, and Master of Cybersecurity students stated curriculum of the studies and the structure of the program as an important factor for choosing UNB as their institution for graduate studies. This is reflected in claims in the peer reviewed literature that mentoring programs, international exchanges, networking events, and freedom to select courses often inspire students to select a particular course of an institution (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Of the 25 students, 2 MCA, 5 MBA, and 2 MCs students spoke in favour of their programs at the UNB. The curriculum of a program plays an important role in developing skills suitable for the job opportunities upon completion of the studies. The students in the 20s had gone through the course curriculum and the offerings of the program, especially those taking IT and cybersecurity. A student in 20s from Nigeria shared, “I knew about the internship opportunities/tie-ups with the corporate in this program and it was the reason why I took admission in this course.” Interestingly, this student was a relative of a UNB alumni who had informed the student about the program. This suggests that talent can be attracted to the city through the alumni network, as well and with the policies around the retention. On the other hand, the students in their 30s anticipated job opportunities would be based on degree as well as their past work experience.

### **Life Plans**

The ability to be a competitive candidate for a job in Canada upon completion of the graduate studies was stated as a motivation for all the students in terms of attraction and retention. The universities are an apt platform for networking and gaining employable

skills (Bridgstock, 2019). A majority of the students (92%) had envisioned a path for their life before coming to Fredericton. 21 (84%) had planned the three-step process for their lives: complete studies, attain post-graduation work permit, and then apply for permanent residency in Atlantic Canada. Among the exceptions, one student had planned to complete master's degree and study further, although was unsure about which program and in which country. Another came to get an international degree before heading back home to join the family business.

Were there changes to these student visions and plan after reaching Fredericton and spending few months in the city? This was discussed with an aim to understand the impact of living in a city on the pre-determined decisions before arriving in Fredericton. All 21 (84%) students who had planned for study, work and permanent residency in Canada still wanted to continue the same journey. However, five of these (students changed their minds about their future location in Canada. Four (16%) students in their 20s and one (4%) student in their 30s wanted to move away from Fredericton to a bigger city in Atlantic Canada, to enjoy perks of a big city and remain eligible for permanent residency through the Atlantic Immigration Program upon completion of their studies. There are several reasons behind this decision, and these have been discussed in detail in the upcoming sections.

### **Career Plans**

Higher education is seen as a platform for developing future oriented capabilities that align with the rapid changes and essential work experiences. It can also be a steppingstone for employment opportunities in an international country (Jackson &

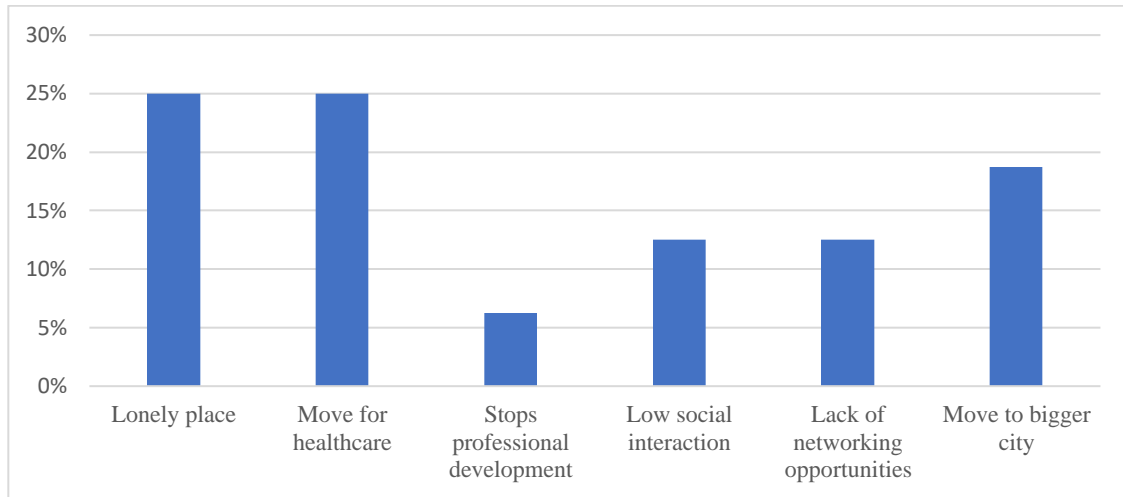
Tomlinson, 2019). All the interviewed students had an aspiration to find a job in a field of their interest area, ranging from data analytics to environment monitoring, and project management to automation. However, most of the students who graduated in April 2022 or were about to graduate in 2022 (19 of 22) had not started applying for the job until the end of their program. According to research on student retention (Clayton, Wessel, McAtee, & Knight, 2018), the chances of retention increase when they are offered a wide array of resources during their studies and followed by steps to solicit job opportunities. This points to an opportunity to increase student retention around cohorts such as my research group that had not yet secured job applications while in their programs

10 of the 24 students were ready to work-from-home in Fredericton, if a good job in their field of work was offered to them. Alternatively, nine students-- all in their 20s-- were not interested in work-from-home. The following reasons were given for not wanting to work from home in Fredericton.

- Covid restricted the social interactions and work-from-home limited the social interaction opportunities.
- Networking is extremely important to gain knowledge, build connections, and move ahead in life. Work-from-home restricts the opportunities for networking.
- Fredericton does not offer the environment to work-from-home. An individual will want to socialize after staying at home for work and there are not many affordable places to visit after office hours and transportation facilities do not help to move around the city.

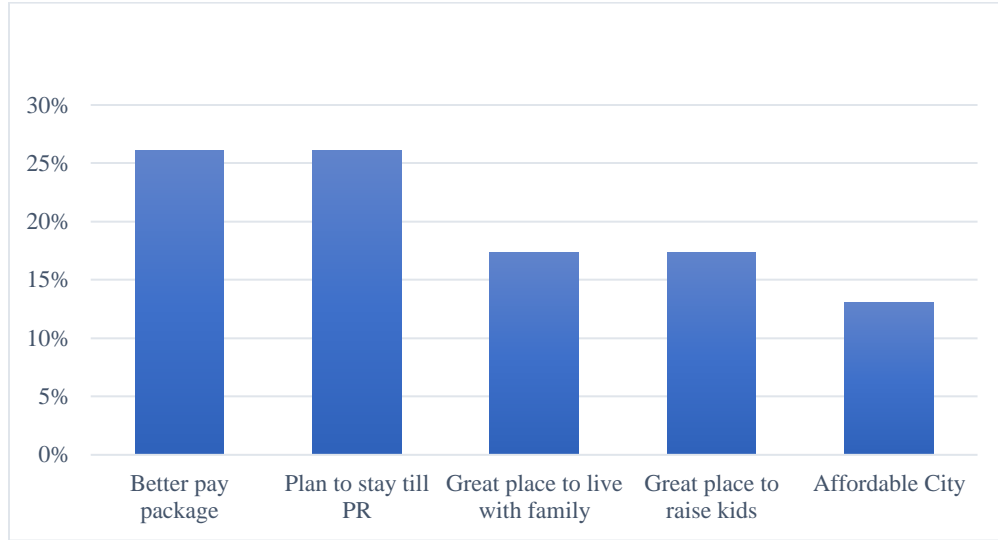
All of reasons provided by students for not accepting a work-from-home option are detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Reasons to not work-from-home



As reported in the peer reviewed literature, work-from-home can become highly tedious and lead to lack of interest, especially in the younger generation (Sanchez, et al., 2021). Indeed, in a study on the topic of work-from-home, it was found that 58% of the respondents did not want to continue work-from-home for various reasons, including lack of social interaction and monotonous daily schedule (Vijai & Suryalakshmi , 2020). As well, work-from-home can attract students when it is provided in a hybrid mode and not made mandatory (Kaur, Oney, Chadbourne, Bookman, & Beckman, 2018). Of the 12 students said they were willing to stay in Fredericton and work-from-home, 9 were in their 30s and 3 in their 20s, with 8 students married. The Figure 4 shows the reasons provided by them to work-from-home.

Figure 4: Reasons to work from home



A study conducted during Covid to analyze the implications of work-from-home on the personal health, family life, and professional performance suggested that employees are keen to continue working from home (Abdullah, Rahmat, Zawawi, Nazhan Khamsah, & Anuarsham, 2020). Studies conducted in 2020 on the topic (Bolisani, Scarso, Ipsen, Kirchner, & Hansen, 2020) found that the work-from-home option provides people with time to spend with family. In particular, it can allow parents to spend more than 40 hours in every week with their children. If these results are analyzed with the demographic factors such as marital status and the age of the students, it can be inferred that students who are in a relationship, are co-habiting, have kids, or plan to start a family are more likely to stay in Fredericton.

### **Expectations and Experiences in Fredericton**

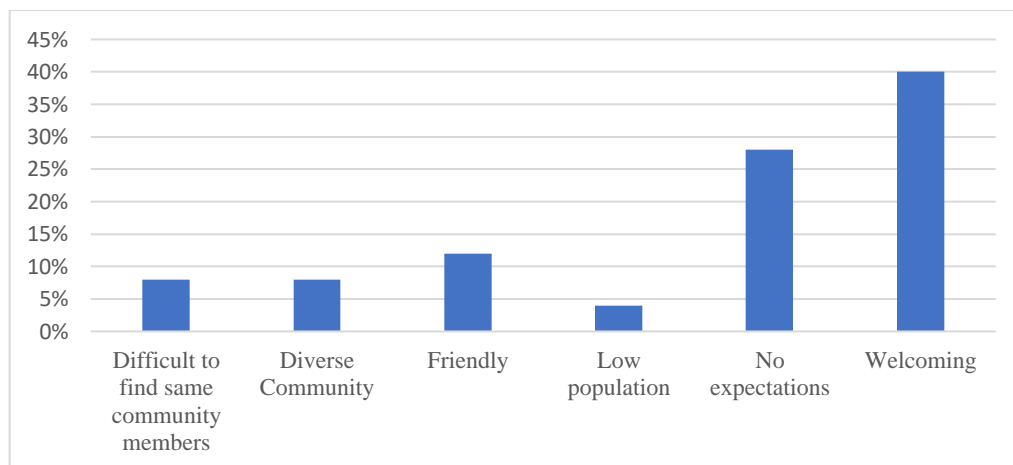
The expectations before arriving in the city of education set a picture about the city in the mind of the students. This is especially the case for the international students who leave their home to come and study in an entirely different place. This section discusses the expectations of international graduate students about Fredericton before arriving in the

city. It addresses the perceptions they had about the community, weather, health facilities, and the people of the city. These are the factors that a person generally considers before deciding to migrate. Expectations tend to play a vital role in the initial decision to move out of a country (Moreno, 2018). However, the expectations about initial ease of establishing a life in a new city of a new country tend to play an important role in the long-term decision about the housing and settlement in a particular geography (Moreno, 2018). These expectations built a certain picture in the mind of the students about Fredericton. When met with reality, i.e., if the city is what they had assumed it to be, the chance of liking the city increases and therefore there is a greater probability of continuing the stay and live in the city in the long term. These four factors that were examined are community, people, healthcare, and weather. In general, these are the criteria that the interviewed students considered before moving to Fredericton.

### *Community*

The expectation of the international students from the community in Fredericton before arriving in Canada are shown in Figure 5 below.

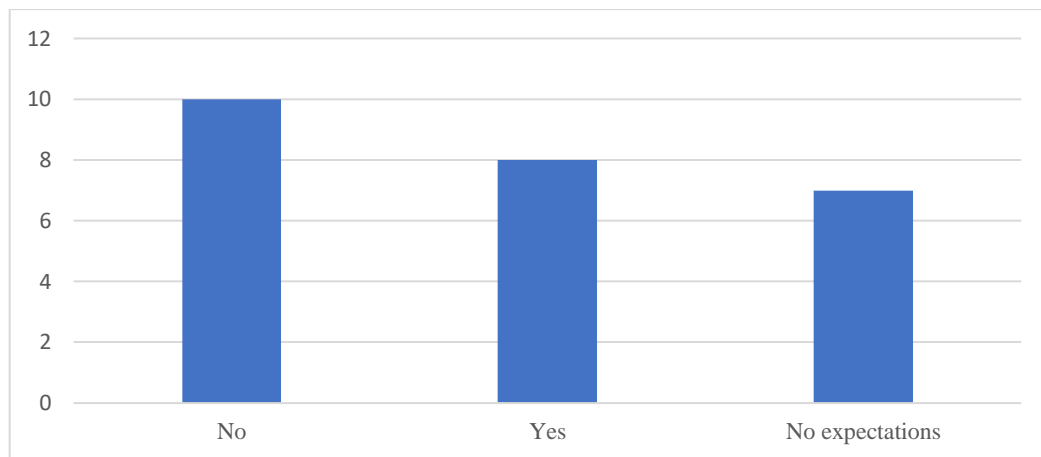
Figure 5: Expectations about community



40% of the students expected the community to be welcoming while 28% came without any expectations towards the community. It was evident in the responses during discussion that students who had an intention of staying after studies did research and set their expectations accordingly. As discussed previously, community plays an important role in the decision to settle in a city or not. The existence of people from the same country, social networks, presence of family and friends, and the overall sentiments/acceptance of newcomers by the community of the city at large influences the decision to stay in the city or not.

The respondents also shared if their expectations were met or not after their arrival and spending few months in Fredericton. Figure 6 clearly suggests that for many of the students, it was a disappointment.

Figure 6: Community related expectations fulfilled or not



Of the 18 students who had come with certain expectations, 55% were disappointed and 45% found the community like they had assumed it to be. The people who were disappointed were the ones who thought the community would be welcoming and friendly. Moreover, a few students had negative community experiences. A student from India

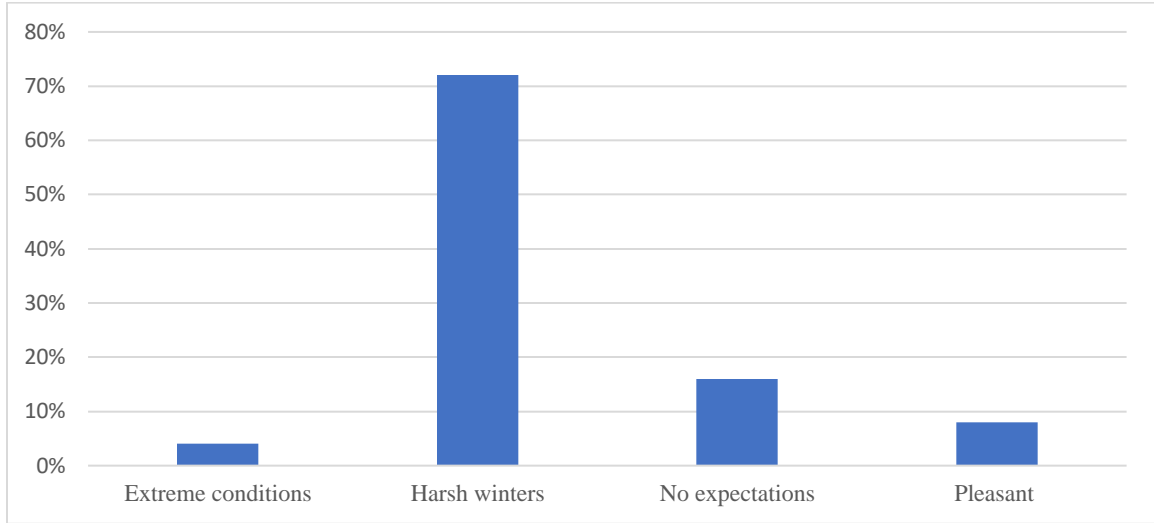
working in a government department on co-op said, “I have been working in the department for the last three months and yet I have not been included in the friendly discussions that happen in the office. I initiated talks with a fellow employee, and she called me rude for asking her how her day was going. Not just that, she said that people from my community lack etiquette. It spoiled my day, and I was completely shocked to hear such comments”.

Other students too shared that it seems like people in Canada have a prejudicial perception about their communities, whether it is people from Muslim community, Asian, or Black community. It shows in their attitude and behavior, making it difficult to think about staying in the city in the long run. A student from Nigeria shared his experience: “I have been at the receiving end of racism at the bus stop, restaurants, and even during walks”. Such incidents instigate discussions amongst communities that these students belong to and increase chances of people moving away to cities with larger populations from their community.

### *Weather*

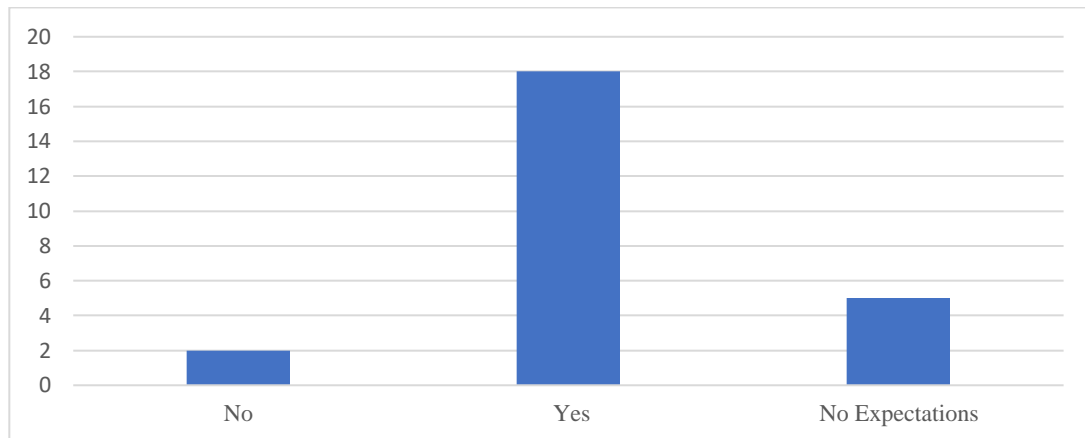
The students had almost similar expectations about the weather in the city. Most of the students expected harsh winters in Canada. Figure 7 shows the overall expectations of the international students. More than 70% of the students came prepared with the mindset to face harsh winters in Canada. Less than 10% expected the weather to be pleasant and these were the students who arrived in Canada during fall season or the during the summers. Around 16% had no expectations about the weather and it was not even on their mind while deciding to accept admission to UNB or NBCC.

Figure 7: Expectations about weather



After coming to Canada, the experience of the students about the weather was discussed and Figure 8 shows if these expectations were met.

Figure 8: Weather related expectations fulfilled or not

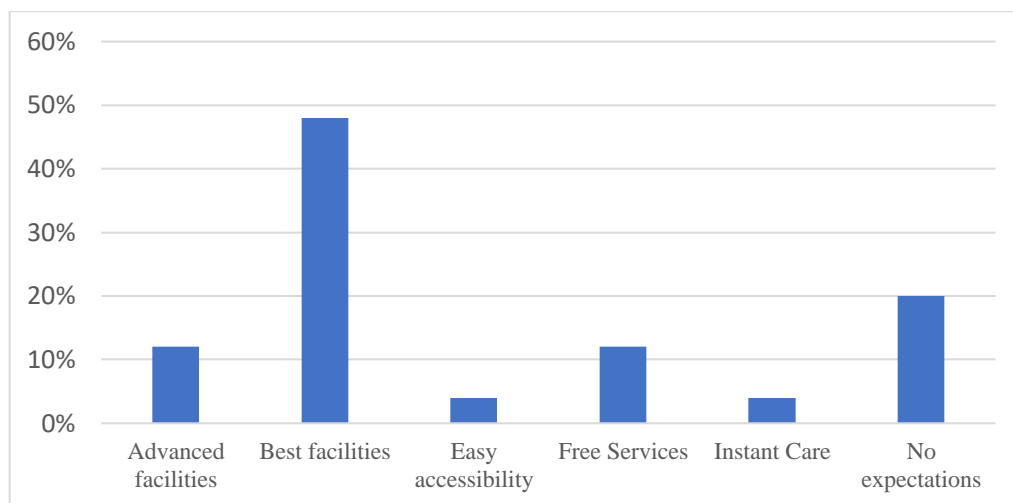


### Healthcare Facilities

When moving to a new country, few factors are considered more than the others and these are the health and the ethnicity group (Moreno, Gnilka, & Ashby, 2019). Support

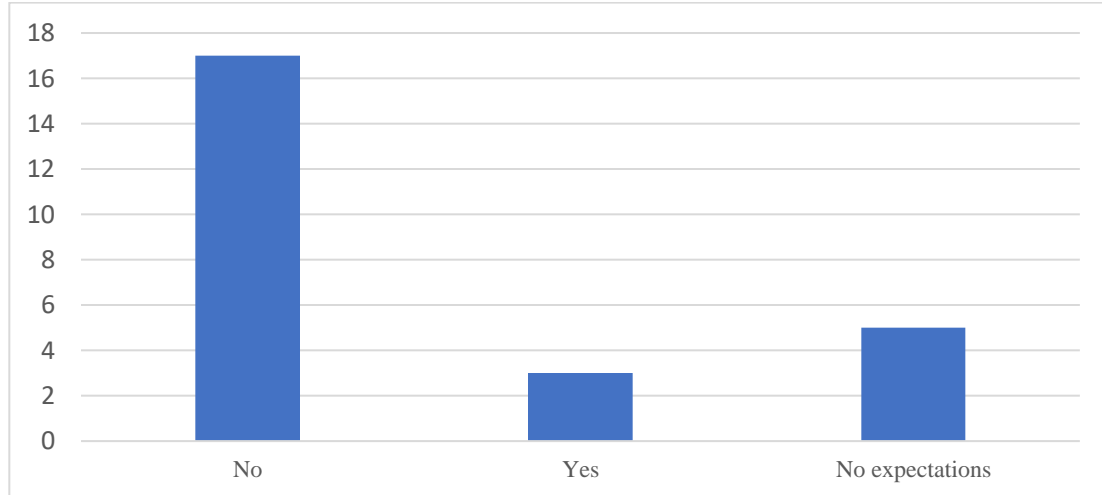
in all forms in the host country can influence the outcome expectations for the newcomers and play an important role in their long-term settlement decision (Franco, Hsiao, Gnilka , & Ashby, 2019). International students too come with certain expectations, especially the provision of public healthcare facilities. It is of absolute importance when students are moving to a new country (Moreno, 2018). Figure 9 provides the levels of expectation of the international students.

Figure 9: Expectations about healthcare



Almost 50% of the students expected the absolute best facilities in Fredericton. During the interviews it was suggested that they knew about free healthcare in Canada and expected a fast and easy process to receive the facilities. However, the reality was different. The students who had intentions of moving to a different city even before arrival were the ones who came with no expectations at all. Of all the services, it was evident that healthcare facilities have been the sources of disappointment for many of the students. Figure 10 shares the results of the question if the expectations about healthcare facilities were met or not.

Figure 10: Healthcare related expectations fulfilled or not



5 of the students did not come with any expectations and of the remaining 20, 17 were disappointed with the services. Healthcare is one of basic facilities necessary for the survival and the results clearly depict that close to 80% of the students were disappointed with the facilities. Moreover, most students in their 30s shared during their interviews that they were concerned about bringing their parents to Fredericton in future. This appeared to be the only deterrent in their plan to stay in Fredericton.

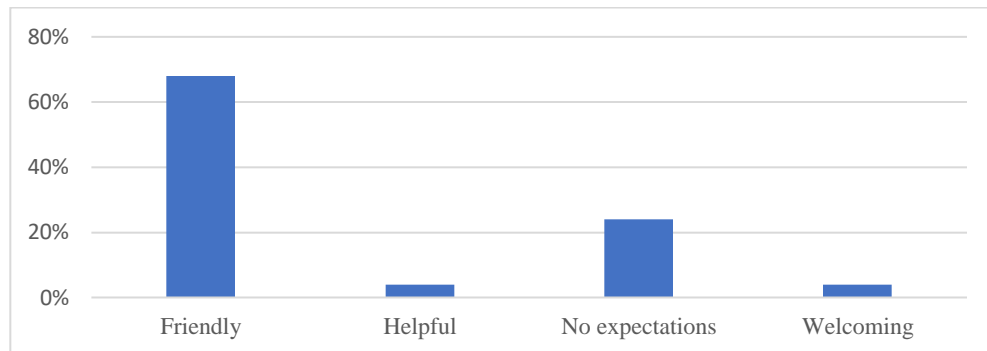
A student in his 30s stated, “I have a genetic concern and I did not get appointment for more than 10 months. It was shocking. I had to get my medicines couriered from India. Healthcare, although free, isn’t at all supportive.” Another student in 20s said that “It took almost two months to receive the results of blood test which was required to identify an infection.” A few students shared that the process of receiving their medical card was lengthy and even took them six months to receive in one case. They were relieved by the fact that they had a university insurance plan which would cover them in case of an emergency. Two students said that their Medicare application was rejected due to lack of

documents. They had to re-apply and wait for the response from the concerned authorities. Such hassles in attaining the basic facilities tend to paint a negative picture

## People

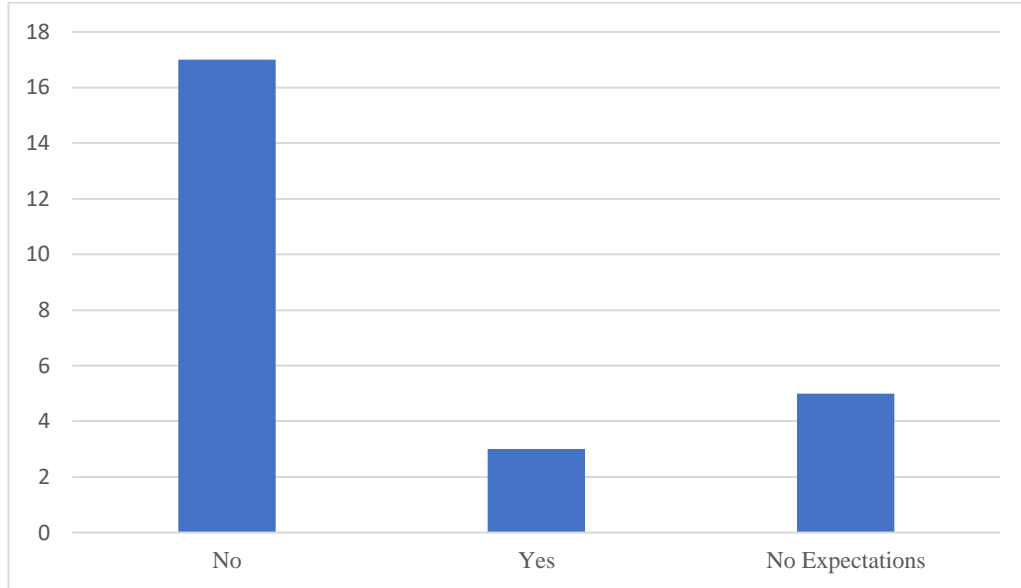
An international student has a lot to consider while moving to a new country and social adjustment with the people is one of them. One of the apprehensions in minds of international students when moving to new country is about acceptance by its people. If faced with discrimination, they are discouraged from making which can affect the mental well-being (Jiang, Yuen, & Horta, 2020). As shown in the Figure 11, the participants came to Canada with the expectations that people will be friendly and helpful.

Figure 11: Expectations about people



Close to 75% of the people came with the impression that people in Fredericton will be friendly, welcoming, and helpful. Around 25% came without any expectations. When away from the family, it becomes important to find people who are helpful and supportive in a new city, new country (Ali, 2022). Upon reaching Fredericton and living here for few months, whether these expectations were met with or not is shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12: People related expectations fulfilled or not

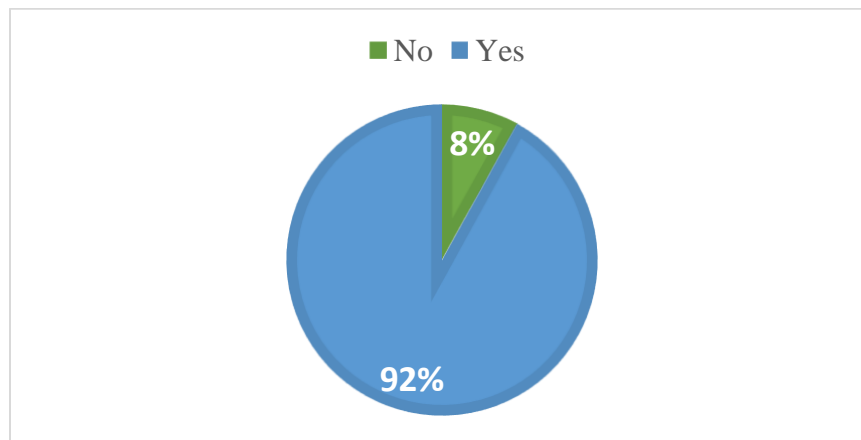


With more than 75% students expecting to meet with friendly, welcoming, and helpful people in Fredericton, the number fell to just 12%. This suggests that of the 25 students, 5 had zero expectations and of the 19 people with positive expectations, only 3 agreed to people being friendly, helpful, and welcoming. One of the students in the age group of 20s shared an incident during the interview. She said, “While I was walking to my workplace, a native came close and said gibberish about my race to me. I did not reply and left the spot in a shock”. Another student aged 39 shared an incident, “While waiting for a bus at the bus stop, I just said hello to a person standing there. I have learned through my experiences in Fredericton that people here greet each other with pleasantries, and I was trying to do the same. I received the worst glare and person turned his back to me. It was shocking”. Of the three students who had positive insights to share, one of the students aged 25 said, “I am reciprocated with a smile when I come across elderly people on the walkways”.

## Ethnic Group

Canada is ethnically and culturally diverse country with diversified ethnic origins: 35% British Isles, 32% Canadian, 15% French origins, 15% Asian, 2% African, 2% of Latin, Central and South American, and 2% Caribbean origins (Thomas, 2016). This makes it necessary to understand if it was easy for international students to find people from their ethnic groups or not. Away from home, people seek support from community members and are at more ease to socialize and find work (Chira, 2013).

Figure 13: Discovered ethnic groups in Fredericton



As depicted in the Figure 13, 92% (23) of the international students were able to connect with people from similar ethnic roots and 8% (2) faced difficulty. The two students who were not able to find people from the same background were both in their 20s and came from Mauritius and Vietnam.

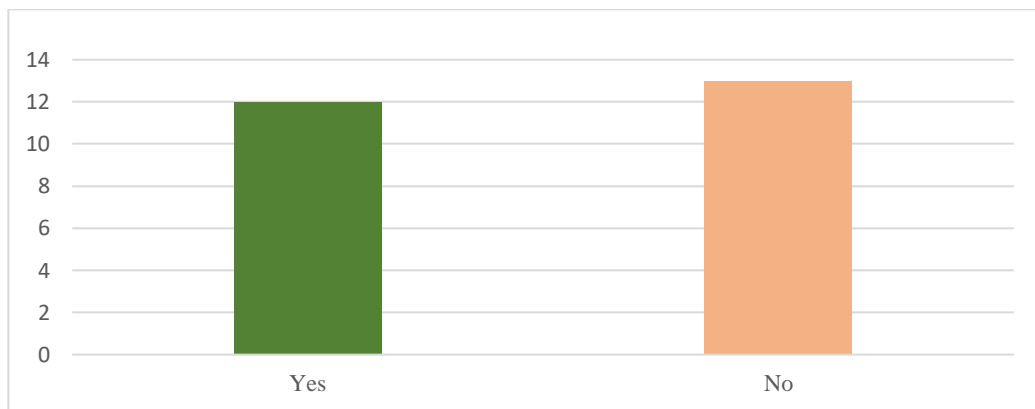
Interestingly, digital media played an important role in helping the students connect with people from their ethnic groups. They reached out to the groups on different digital platforms and were happily accepted to be part of these digital communities. Another important role player was UNB and NBCC. Students were able to connect with fellow members in their classrooms, project groups, and even in the common areas of the

institutions. Such acquaintances help people relate with fellow beings and develop a sense of belongingness in the city. Friends in the city provide a huge mental and emotional support to people who leave their homes in other countries to come and study in Fredericton. This sense of belongingness helped students decide to stay in the city if their friends also decided to stay upon completion of their studies.

### **Plans to Stay in Fredericton upon Completion of Graduate Studies**

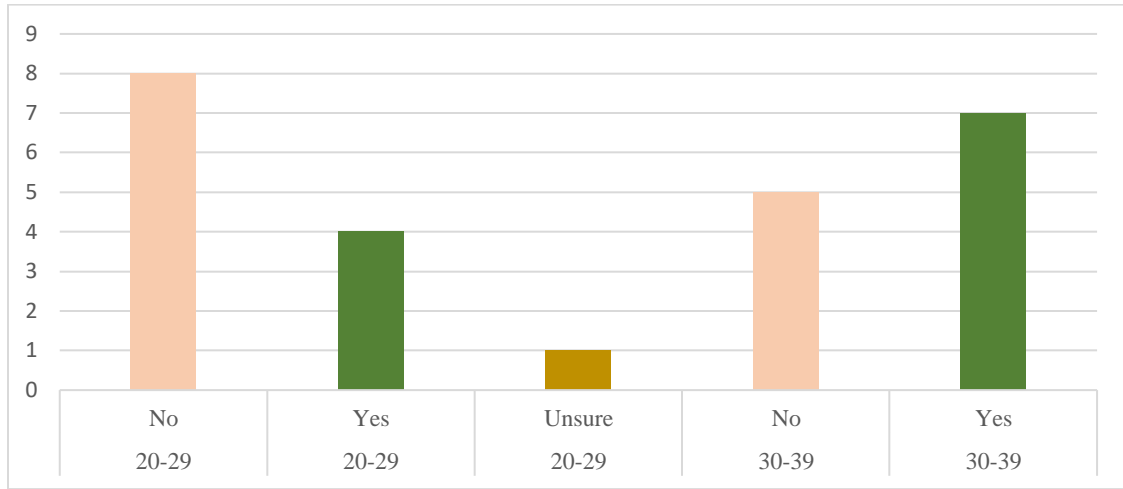
Based on all the expectations and experiences in Fredericton, the students were asked if they would stay back in Fredericton in the long term (more than 3 years) or move to a different city. The responses are shown in Figure 14. They clearly show an almost equal divide between students who plan to stay and those who plan to move away from Fredericton. Of the total 25 students, 12 students wanted to stay back and 13 wanted to move away.

Figure 14: Decision to stay in Fredericton



The students in their 30s were more inclined to making Fredericton their home, while majority of the students in their 20s wanted to move to a bigger city. The number of students in the age groups and the reasons are provided below in the Figure 15.

Figure 15: Final conclusion based on age groups



As provided in the table, international graduate students in their 20s are much more likely to move out of Fredericton upon completion of their studies. The students in the 20s age group expected to follow almost a similar path of studies followed by work permit and then permanent residency in a bigger city in Canada. A student aged 24 from India said the “GMAT waiver made it easier for me to get the admission and come to Canada. I came with an intention to complete studies and move to a bigger city in future”.

Students who planned to move to bigger cities were often motivated by presence of family or extended family members in these cities. They planned to move to be close to family as they can receive help or support (financially, socially, mentally) by being close to them. 61% of the students in the age group of 20-29 plan to move away. A student in his 20s said, “I plan to move to Toronto after my studies as my relatives live there and they want me to come and join them. As a single person here, it will be easier for me to stay close to family, in case of any requirement, it will be easier to manage things with them around”.

Among the other common reasons from students in their 20s were the following.

- The UNB internship program is great, but the pay scale offered by the companies in Fredericton is not competitive.
- Part-time jobs and internship opportunities are attractive as it helps pay the bills however, the job opportunities upon completion of the program are not competitive. A student from India shared, “I know that pay-scales are higher in Toronto and Vancouver than here. I want to make more money from the job, hence, I plan to move to these cities”.
- The city is not suitable for single students unless they have close friends or relatives.
- It is too early in their life to establish a base in a city. They want to explore their options before deciding upon a particular city.
- Bigger cities have better social opportunities.

The remaining students who wanted to stay in Fredericton had the following reasons.

- There are abundant job opportunities in their field and the jobs provide a means for practical implementation of the learnings of their program. The city offers good opportunities to start the career in this field of work.
- Students who aim to start a business of their own want to stay in Fredericton due to its programs supporting the start-ups.
- Fredericton is a suitable place to raise kids. The low traffic, easy access to basic facilities such as park, school, recreational facilities, and the overall ambience of the city make it a great to raise family.

The students in the age group of 30-39 who planned to stay had the following reasons.

- Three students saw Fredericton as a great place for a family and loved the peaceful environment.
- Two students received good job opportunity and hence, wanted to stay back.
- Fredericton is an affordable city as compared to bigger cities in Canada and it offers a life-work balance.
- The city is small in its territory, and this eliminates the chances of being stuck in traffic for hours.

A few of the students in 30s wanted to move out of the city as they felt that there is lack of opportunities for career growth. They also said the taxes are higher in New Brunswick and there are more affordable provinces in the country with better job opportunities. A couple wanted to move to another city with better healthcare facilities as they faced two incidents of lack of support. In one incident they had to wait for 7-8 hours to receive the treatment and in another they could not get an appointment to see a doctor. The husband had a critical condition, and he needed some specific medicines, but it took more than few weeks to resolve the concern. Additionally, they planned to bring their parents and were not confident about the healthcare facilities in case something happened to their parents.

## 6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to answer the research question “What are the deciding factors for international graduate/post-graduate students in their 20s and 30s to stay or move from Fredericton upon completion of their studies?” After collecting data through semi-structured interviews and analyzing the collected inputs, the main conclusion of the study is that age plays an important role in the decision of an international graduate student to stay or move away from Fredericton upon completion of their studies. The students in their 30s are more inclined to make Fredericton their home as compared to the students in their 20s.

### **Key Findings:**

There are numerous factors that influence the decision to stay or move away from Fredericton. Demographics, specifically the age and marital status, seems to play an important role in the final decision of international students about selection of a city to stay upon completion of the graduate studies. The age factor, which was the primary focus for this study, suggests that people in their 20s want to explore the options and opportunities before calling a place home. They are not bound by factors such as partner or pressure from family to invest in a home, hence they have more freedom of choice. They do not have any dependents, which makes it easier for them to move from a city to another or from a country to another.

On the other hand, people in their 30s are more likely to stay in Fredericton. Their aim is to build a life with their partner and children. With the availability of good facilities, job opportunities, and work-from-home option, they are more likely to stay in Fredericton as compared to students in their 20s and those who are single.

The age and the marital/co-habitation status seems to play an important role in the deciding factors. The country of origin plays a role in the initial days of the coming to city as students look for people from their community to seek guidance about basic whereabouts and facilities. The students who had ethnic groups from their home country seem to have adjusted more easily in the city and formed a closer relation with their community members. Students who did not find any or found a fewer number of people from their home country spoke about the absence of belongingness to the city as they missed the festivals and cultural events. Students from Nigeria and India were able to easily find fellow community members, whereas students from Azerbaijan, Mauritius, and Vietnam faced difficulty in finding a larger number of people from their community.

Most of the students opted for Fredericton for their studies because of a relatively easier admission, lower fee structure, and curriculum. Most of the students in both the age-groups came with the mindset to complete studies, get a permit to work in Canada, and finally apply for the permanent residency to become a resident in Canada. The main factors that attracted them towards Fredericton as the education destination were the affordability of the city and low fees of the education institutes. Additionally, specific programs that focus on environment and venture creation seems to attract students who have an intention to work in the city after completion of their studies in the specific field of work. This shows that there is a scope of attracting more students to these specific programs and increasing the possibility of their retention in the city after completion of their studies.

Job opportunities upon completion of the studies are a major criterion for the students in both age groups and all academic programs. The students in the younger age group had higher expectations from Fredericton as compared to students in the later age

group. The younger generation seems to be highly disappointed with the social environment and lack of recreational activities suitable for their peer group. They want to network with people from their age group from different cultural backgrounds, but the opportunities are not abundant in Fredericton. Additionally, they want to enjoy life after office hours, get an opportunity to explore the social network and hopefully, find a suitable partner however, they think that the chances are bleak due to small community. This suggests that there is a gap between the requirements of the younger generation and the availability of the facilities in the city. There is a scope of retaining the graduate talent in the city provided the facilities are improved.

Although the overall experience of living in the city for many of the students has been good with support of the friends, the students have experienced events of discrimination outside of the university. Few of the students had been at the receiving end of racial discrimination in public places such as bus stops, while walking, or at a shopping center. As discussed in the study, racial discrimination can be a deterrent and it can instigate students to move to cities wither people from their communities on a larger scale. There is room for sensitization about behavior of people and community in Fredericton towards international students. There are several community meetings that are organized across the city on regular basis and such sensitization programs can be introduced in these meetings.

A major disappointment for the international students has been the facilities of the city. Transportation system ranks on top this list especially for the students in their 20s. Even though a bus pass has been provided by the university, the frequency of the bus restricts the movement of the students in the city. The one-hour gap between the service and non-availability of service on Sunday and holidays has been discouraging as they are

dependent on the bus service to go to work or move around for leisure. The students in their 30s tend to purchase their own vehicle and more likely a used vehicle. For students completely dependent on the bus services for commute from home to university and workplace, the lack of frequency of the bus service may push them to other cities providing reliable bus system. They are more inclined towards moving to a bigger city in Atlantic Canada for better opportunities and better lifestyle.

The students in the 30s age group had lower expectation from the city and still they were disappointed with the people and the healthcare facilities. They too have faced incidents of racial discrimination. The major disappointment has been the healthcare facilities for them. They are concerned for the health of their family and immediate attention of the doctors in case something happens to the family members.

### **Policy Implications:**

The findings of this study offer certain policy implications. The age factor in the current permanent residency programs including the provincial nomination programs is given more weightage compared to the professional experience gained by an individual. Efforts are being put by the government to reduce the skilled labour gap in Canada however, more weightage is given to younger candidates in the permanent residency programs as points are higher for candidates in 20s as compared to candidates in 30s (IRCC, 2021). This mismatch may be revisited to address the existing gap. Additionally, the government, the industry and the education institutes can collaborate for development of a platform with pool of the about to graduate students in different programs. This can accelerate the process of hiring of talented candidates in the city or province at the larger scale and retention of the students. Another aspect that can be considered is merging the

business concepts of market segmentation in the policy making for attracting the right candidates in the city/province. This might provide new insights towards designing of an attraction policy that will assist the retention of the international students.

To conclude, there is not a very strong single indicator that differentiates the decision-making process between the students of the two age groups, however, based on the findings, it can be concluded that student in the 30s are more likely to stay in Fredericton than the students in the 20s.

### **Contribution to the literature:**

The study has focused on identifying the decision-making factors of graduate and post-graduate students to stay or move from Fredericton upon completion of their studies through an array of 26 different questions. These factors suggest that age plays an important role but also important are the pull factors that are initial the reasons for attraction of students to the city. However, these factors vary from city to city/region to region. The pull factors are largely divided into buckets such as social, economic, political but that is basically the definition of them. These do have certain parameters underneath them but there is no specific division or identification of these factors according to the cities/regions. In the literature review it was clearly visible that metropolitan cities such as Toronto/Vancouver attract more than 75% of the immigrants. However, the discovery through this thesis suggests that there is clearly a section of people who want to settle in the smaller cities such as Fredericton. In theory, if these factors can be defined/re-grouped according to the region then it can contribute to the literature on a larger scale.

## 7. Future Research

The findings from the study have shown that there is potentially an area of research around the age of international students seeking admission in different colleges and universities for increasing the retention rate of international students in Fredericton. It is evident from the thesis research and analysis that students in each of the two age groups have a peculiar mindset about settling down in life: to continue their stay in Fredericton or not. A majority of the students in their 20s who are single want to explore the country as well their options for life, further studies, high paying job opportunities before making this decision. On the other hand, students in their 30s consider Fredericton as a city to settle down and raise a family.

Future studies can include a larger sample of the students or conduct a survey with higher number of students across the province. The research question can be more specific towards students who are single and students who are married or co-habitat as the findings of this study suggested that students in a relationship/co-habiting/married or the ones with kids are more inclined towards continuing their stay in Fredericton. Another aspect that can be further evaluated is the job opportunities before completion of the graduate studies. Based on the inputs received from students, it can be conferred that the higher the chances of a job offer before completion, the better are the chances for continuing the stay in Fredericton. This aspect can be further explored to develop programs or collaborations with the industry for absorption of the candidates in the job industry in Fredericton.

Studies providing a platform for married, live-in, or co-habitation couples with inputs from both the international student and the partner can be conducted to understand the decision-making factors from a couple/partners/family perspective. This could provide

a more in-depth understanding of towards the settlement plan. Such a study can assist with the framework used for the development of the retention policies for international students in Fredericton, in the Province of New Brunswick, and on a larger scale for the retention of international students in smaller cities, in general.

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# **Curriculum Vitae**

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