

Peer-Reviewed Article

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 9, Issue 3 (2019), pp. 795-814
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v9i3.751
ojed.org/jis



Satisfiers and Dissatisfiers for International Vocational Education Students: A Case Study Using Narrative Frames

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ABSTRACT

While the satisfaction of international students is frequently surveyed, much of this research is based on a very limited range of closed-item data collection methods, producing findings that partially reflect the researchers' assumptions in designing the survey items. Recognizing the potential value in using methods that are more open-ended and qualitative analyses, the present study employed narrative frames and follow-up interviews to explore the satisfiers and dissatisfiers for international vocational education students at one institution in New Zealand. Reporting on perceptions of the class, institution, and community, the findings identify the participants' top-of-mind (dis)satisfiers and complement the existing literature by identifying seldom-reported themes. Discussion of issues in analyzing narrative frames is also provided.

Keywords: dissatisfiers, international student satisfaction, narrative frames, satisfiers

As befits an important global industry, satisfaction surveys are used in international education. Insights gained from these tools inform the shape, direction, and marketing of education at institutional, national, and international levels. Among the most

prominent are annual surveys, generated or commissioned by industry stakeholders, which elicit responses from several thousand students or more, such as the International Association of Language Centres' (2017) survey of sojourning language students. Alongside such international studies, similarly numerous country- and institution-specific surveys are conducted at regular intervals, though the findings are not necessarily disseminated beyond the education providers who administer them. Complementing these are a diverse range of research reports with objectives that are academic in nature, and that are often focused on understanding the factors behind student satisfaction rather than simply providing an evaluation of current satisfaction across various dimensions. Within these, by far the most frequently reported research method is the Likert-scale questionnaire (e.g., Grebennikov & Skaines, 2007; Sam, 2001; Ward & Masgoret, 2004), the main advantage of which is the opportunity to identify statistically robust trends across large populations.

Importantly, however, questionnaires (and similar quantitative approaches, including interviews with closed-ended questions) are prone to producing seriously distorted findings because researchers' assumptions and biases are built into the design and selection of questions (Hammersley, 2008). As such, despite their undoubted strengths for some types of research questions, questionnaires provide limited value toward understanding phenomena from the participants' perspectives. Furthermore, given the frequency with which questionnaires are used, and, more particularly, the frequency with which certain question foci appear (e.g., course workload), the possibility remains that further studies largely reinforce what has already been generally established, rather than break new ground and broaden future research agendas.

We posit, therefore, that much can be gained by building upon the substantially smaller body of literature that explores international student satisfaction through more "open" research approaches, which allows for greater participant nomination of the key issues, along with reporting of individuals' voices. The present study aimed to do this surveying international students by deploying narrative frames focused on satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of their sojourning experience at one vocational tertiary institution in New Zealand. This was then followed by extended, open interviews that allowed us to further pursue key ideas. The objective of this article is both to report findings relating to the satisfaction of international vocational education students at the institution in question, and to raise issues in the use of narrative frames and the reporting and analysis of satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Satisfaction

Following Letcher and Neves (2010), student satisfaction is defined as "the favorability of a student's subjective evaluations of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education" (p. 3). Key frameworks for understanding satisfaction have emerged particularly from work in the service sector, the most prominent being the expectancy-disconfirmation model, in which consumer satisfaction is thought to arise particularly from the gap between consumers' pre-

service expectations of service quality and their perceptions of what they subsequently experienced (Oliver, 2010). Where consumer evaluations of quality meet or exceed their expectations, satisfaction usually results, while failure to meet expectations usually results in dissatisfaction. Even for relatively brief service encounters, these expectations and evaluations are multidimensional, as indicated by the ServQual instrument (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991), which operationalizes expectancy-disconfirmation along five dimensions: reliability (in performing the service to standard), assurance (trust in the provider's knowledge; their courtesy), tangibles (facilities, materials and personnel), empathy ("caring, individualized attention"), and responsiveness ("willingness to help"; Parasuraman et al., 1991, p. 41). In exploring the satisfaction of international students, such multi-dimensional assessment reveals a broad range of factors relevant to their experience in the host country (Sears et al., 2017), some of which lie beyond what an institution would traditionally consider to be the service they provide. These may include the way that students are received outside the institution by members of the host community, the local availability of familiar foods, and off-campus shopping and entertainment.

From the perspective of an education provider, a reasonable way to structure such an exploration would be to start from the core service—learning experiences—and work progressively outward to the support services and structures of the institution, and then to the peripheral aspects of the service, including the general experience of living in the host country. In the present study this has been operationalized as a distinction between experiences in the class, the institution, and outside the institution (i.e., within the local community or the larger country. It is worth noting, however, that this three-part construction does not map exactly onto the continuum between the provision of core and peripheral services. Homestay—the practice of placing an international student in the home of a local family—is an example of a reasonably core service of some education providers and one that is largely experienced outside of the institution.

An important theoretical contribution to discussion of satisfaction has been Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman's (1959) observation that some factors influence satisfaction only in a positive direction and others only in a negative direction. For instance, in their study of work satisfaction, achievement and advancement were identified as major sources of satisfaction but, in their absence, these played an "extremely small" role in producing negative attitudes to work (p. 82). Conversely, factors such as administration and working conditions proved to be major sources of dissatisfaction but had "little potency to affect job attitudes in a positive direction" (p. 82). Overall, they found that this unidirectional effect proved "truer of dissatisfiers than satisfiers" (p. 112).

Studies of International Student Satisfaction

Although, as discussed above, international students are frequently surveyed about their satisfaction with certain services, relatively few recent studies have sought to identify their "top of mind" issues and to understand the influence of these on satisfaction. Nevertheless, a broad range of issues has been found to be relevant.

Considering first the class, perhaps unsurprisingly, the quality of teaching and teaching materials is reported to be a key factor in satisfaction (Ammigan, 2019; Bianchi, 2013; Grebennikov & Skaines, 2007), as is academic performance (Bianchi, 2013; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Dissatisfaction may arise particularly from the struggles that some international students experience in adapting to local classroom-based social conventions and pedagogical styles (e.g., M. Li, 2016; Sato & Hodge, 2015). A further dissatisfier is a perceived lack of academic support from lecturers and tutors (Sato & Hodge, 2015). Also important is the interaction between domestic and international students, both inside and outside of the class. Students report valuing inclusiveness practices and friendship building (Ammigan, 2019; Beloucif, Mehafdi, & Komey, 2018; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

At the institutional level, Finn and Darmody's (2015) study reported that satisfaction with the institution as a whole was found to be the strongest determiner of the overall satisfaction with the study abroad experience. The category of tangibles may be especially important, including features such as the quality of buildings, library services, and technology (e.g. Arambewela & Hall, 2006; Ammigan, 2019; Beloucif, Mehafdi, & Komey, 2018). Indeed, Arambewela and Hall's (2006) comparative study of Thai, Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian students found tangibles to be the most important influence on institutional satisfaction overall. Additionally, it appears that such facilities and access to them may be more important for international than domestic students (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2007). Sam (2001) found that providing students with incomplete and/or inaccurate information prior to departure from their home country was an important source of dissatisfaction.

Studies also consistently emphasize the student experience of the community and country in general. Accommodation arrangements are crucial to satisfaction. Experiences living in homestays vary widely between being highly satisfying and highly dissatisfying (Ho, Li, Cooper, & Holmes, 2007; Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Homestays are identified as offering potentially important support, cultural insight, and language acquisition opportunities (Lee, Wu, Di, & Kinginger, 2017; Marijuan & Sanz, 2018), but for some, they represent a particularly difficult arrangement and can be associated with loneliness and mistreatment by the host family (Ho et al., 2007).

In terms of experiences in the community, dissatisfaction arising from perceived discrimination is frequently reported (Bianchi, 2013; Miller & Sujitparapitaya, 2010; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Much of this experience with discrimination is reported to come in the form of microaggressions (subtle insults), such as exclusion (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014). In some contexts, more overtly aggressive behavior is experienced, such as reports from one research context of Asian international students being "frequently screamed at and told to leave the country" (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012, p 105).

METHODS

The objective of the present study was to explore student satisfaction in a way that permitted greater student nomination of issues and to present more of the student voice in reporting the findings. The focus was on students enrolled at one tertiary

vocational education provider in New Zealand (NZ). We selected narrative frames and follow-up interviews as the methodology for exploring the following research questions:

1. What do international students find satisfying and dissatisfying about their classes?
2. What do international students find satisfying and dissatisfying about the learning institution they attend?
3. What do international students find satisfying and dissatisfying about their life in New Zealand?

As mentioned above, two data collection methods were used for the study: narrative frames and interviews. A narrative frame is best described as a template of sentence starters that seeks to prompt participants into revealing and reflecting upon their experiences about topics of interest to researchers (Barkhuizen, 2014). The stories that come from these frames allow researchers to appreciate the participants' experiences in their own words. From a researcher's perspective, the narrative frame is an effective data gathering device as it allows the researcher to not only elicit content related to specific research questions, but to combine the responses from a large number of participants to create a coherent overview of how participants feel about targeted situations. This use of narrative frames is especially effective when dealing with language learners due to the built-in scaffolding that helps students to find the language to say what they want to say. In addition to this, the frame still provides enough opportunity for participants to add other topics of interest should they so desire (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). Finally, the exploratory nature of the frame provides a good entry point into new research areas, and accommodates the use of follow-up interviews to expand upon initial responses (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008).

The participants for this study were international students studying at one higher learning institute in NZ that focuses on vocational education. International students were defined for this study as those on an international student visa; thus, the perceptions of NZ immigrants and former refugees were not sought. All enrolled international students were invited to participate via an email sent by the international liaison office of the institution. They were invited to fill in a narrative frame (see Appendix A), which asked them to complete a series of sentences focusing on how satisfied or dissatisfied they were about their experiences with their classes, the institution, and NZ generally. There were no restrictions on how they could complete the frames. If willing to participate, students were asked to return their completed narrative frame either as an email attachment or to anonymously deposit it into a box on campus. A small number also submitted hardcopies in person. The initial timeframe for this was two weeks (later extended by a further two weeks).

The frames also requested biographical data, as well as an indication of whether or not the participants would be open to a follow-up interview. The majority of the participants indicated that they were open to follow up interviews. One hundred and eight students completed and returned the frame, representing slightly less than 10% of all the enrolled international students. The students who responded identified themselves as coming from a host of different nations, including China, Brazil,

Russia, Tahiti, Sri Lanka, India, Kenya, Bolivia, Saudi Arabia, Burma, Japan, France, South Korea, Jordan, Malaysia, and Nepal. Of the 93 who specified their current field of study, those studying within the institution's Business school accounted for 23%, with the remainder including Nursing, Media Arts, Information Technology, English, Civil Engineering, Hospitality, Applied Science, Veterinary, and TESOL.

Degree programs at this institution require a minimum an English entry level of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) 6.0 or equivalent, while a few diploma and certificate courses accept students with IELTS 5.5. Of the English language students, three reported studying in a qualification with an entry level of 5.0, and the others with entry levels of 5.5 or 6.0. Although language proficiency may have limited the expression of certain ideas, it is reasonable to assume that the key themes were captured, given the short length of the narrative frames, the 2-week time period, and access to dictionaries. For language reasons, no English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students were selected for the interviews.

An iterative/inductive approach (Dörnyei, 2011) was used to code and compile the responses into different factors that influence student perception of their experiences. This was in line with the *analysis of narratives* approach (Polkinghorne, 1995), which follows a paradigmatic procedure when coding themes. Such an approach involves identifying, then categorizing, themes according to emerging patterns of association (Barkhuizen, 2013). Each coding and categorizing decision was agreed upon by all four core members of the research team, and in a number of cases this led to considerable debate as to what could be inferred about the respondent's meaning. A protocol was established to tend toward caution when inferring meaning.

From there, the themes were used to create a picture of the satisfying and dissatisfying elements of being an international student in this context. Riessman (2008) acknowledged that determining the boundaries of "stories" can be difficult and highly interpretive, but the structure of the frames allowed for an easier thematic analysis, as the responses were already written thematically (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). In teams, the complete narrative frames were read and sorted within the three broader categories satisfiers and dissatisfiers: classes, institution, and country. From there, themes were identified and grouped accordingly to determine how the students felt about the broader categories. Within the three frames, some responses had more than one possible theme.

Following the thematic analysis, follow-up interviews were conducted with 20 of the participants, which provided more contextual details of their experiences (interview length ranged from 30 to 90 min); these data are reported here only sparingly in order to clarify comments from the narrative frames. Interviewees were chosen based on the themes that emerged, particularly those that indicated troubling or problematic experiences. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of questions that allowed divergences to occur if necessary. They were also conducted with the understanding that knowledge formed during the interviews was co-constructed between the participant and researcher, and that parameters of sensitivity (Mann, 2016) were often vital in ensuring the success of the interviews. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed to broaden the context of understanding the satisfiers and dissatisfiers.

RESULTS

The findings presented here are drawn mainly from the narrative frames, with a small number of comments from the interviews for clarification. We leave aside the analysis of complete, individual narratives in favor of an examination of the themes that emerged from them *in toto*. Overall, as often reported internationally (e.g., International Association of Language Centres, 2017), students expressed an overwhelming sense of satisfaction through both the narrative frames and the interviews. These data tended to readily cluster into fairly general themes, such as *teachers* and *natural environment*. Instances of dissatisfaction were fewer, more varied, and tended to be tied to specific, individual experiences.

Tables 1–3 present a summary of the most common themes to emerge from the frames. The percentages indicate the proportion of respondents whose comments reflected each theme; as a number of respondents made complex statements reflecting more than one theme, in most cases the combined figures are greater than 100%. In each category, more respondents nominated sources of satisfaction than dissatisfaction.

Class Context

At the level of classes, the most commonly mentioned themes related to teachers, with displays of kindness, friendliness, and patience being the most reported satisfier (42%) ahead of teaching skill and knowledge (35%). Very often these two factors were cited in tandem. Brief, representative examples relating to teachers' personalities and interactional behavior include:

“Every teachers are very kind and patient, always encourage me to keep going.”

“I think they are very friendly and they help me a lot.”

“They are friendly and helped me with my study.”

“The tutors have always had nice patience for us.”

The following statement is an example of an expression of satisfaction with teachers being professional, well-prepared, and sensitive to students' needs:

The way the tutors understand the language barrier and are ready to teach in different manners or styles for better understanding of people with English as their second or third language. Tutors do also understand that we international students come from different cultures. So they also help you to understand and adapt to New Zealand culture. Which I personally found very useful as it helped me a lot to understand New Zealand; the country, the people and the culture here.

Although, overall, there was widespread student satisfaction with teachers, dissatisfaction was expressed about cases in which students perceived teachers to lack the attributes of professionalism, including subject knowledge and teaching

competency (6%) and behavior that was unfriendly or unhelpful (5%). The most detailed comment in this regard was the following:

Because I cannot adapt to that tutor's teaching methods. First of all, his voice is so low in class, which it's hard for me to hear what he said even he sit next to me. Then, we have a test about [particular equipment]. Since that tutor does not how to use it, he cannot teach us . . . and just recommend us to find the text book or search the videos to learn by ourselves. Moreover for the project report, he does not give us the grading standard and the content requirements. So most of the classmates are confus[ed] in this class. One of the Kiwi students talk in the class that as a local people, she can't understand what the teacher said in the class and she can't image how the international students' feeling. Because these reasons, that tutor was complained by students . . . At this moment, that tutor, that tutor is the worst teacher I have ever met in New Zealand.

This response captures a range of dissatisfiers attributed to the teacher: pedagogical style, pedagogical competency, subject knowledge, personal characteristics, and transparency in assessment grading. Here, and elsewhere in these data, dissatisfaction with teachers tended to involve multiple interrelating issues that ultimately had an effect on the participants' overall course achievement.

The next most important theme was classmates and interactions with them. Satisfying elements included having friendly relationships, particularly those which extended to social engagement outside the classroom (27%). The most frequently occurring comments related to aspects of interactional behavior, with the following representing very typical statements:

“They are nice and friendly, they are very patient when I meet problems.”

“They were very friendly, receptive and helpful.”

“All of them are very nice, we got the group chat on Facebook, we support each other well.”

However, classmates were also a frequently cited source of dissatisfaction, particularly in relation to behavior (8%), including interpersonal matters (“three mean girls”) and, more frequently, disruptive behavior:

“This classmates delay the class [be]cause of don't take it seriously.”

Dissatisfaction also arose from other international students communicating in their first language (6%), thereby excluding participation of others in classroom interactions: “Some students who always communicated in their mother tongue made other students to feel left out.” Loosely connected to this, two respondents (3%) also cited a lack of interaction between international and domestic (NZ or “Kiwi”) students:

“Kiwi students may don't willing to complete assignment with international students because of language problem.”

“[It is] hard to make foreign friends.”

The most frequent dissatisfiers were class scheduling/timetabling (15%) and facilities (13%), which were both much less frequent sources of satisfaction (6% and 2% respectively), suggesting a predominantly unidirectional effect. Scheduling/timetabling appeared to be a simple binary between convenient and inconvenient. Classroom facilities were reported as satisfying when they were considered modern and convenient, and dissatisfying when of poor quality or in poor condition, or when rooms were cramped, noisy, or had poorly functioning temperature control.

Matters relating to assessment proved to be another important dissatisfier. Poor assessment results was nominated as a dissatisfier by 10% of respondents. Assessment practices were mentioned by 9% of respondents, including comments such as the following:

“There are too many assessments. In order to help us achieve those assessments, teachers have to spend many time preparing them, instead of teaching [course name]. We spend lots of time attending assessments.”

“Not reasonable assignment time frame, ambiguous marking.”

“We had too much tests and they are also doing at the same day. So we always felt high pressure and we did not have enough time to prepare them.”

In the follow-up interviews, a number of participants discussed their dissatisfaction with grading practices, and particularly what they perceived to be a lack of transparency, especially in relation to the grading of essays. For many, essays were reported to be a largely unfamiliar assessment type and were felt to be too subjective in grading. Two (undergraduate) interviewees spoke at length about their frustration at being penalized for minor formatting errors in the use of APA style, when this revealed nothing about their mastery of the subject. Assessment practices appear to fundamentally represent a (unidirectional) dissatisfier, with no comments indicating these were a source of satisfaction; it is also notable that no students singled out successful results as a particular source of satisfaction.

Overall, the most frequently cited sources of satisfaction aligned with Parasuraman et al.’s (1991) categories of empathy (teachers and classmates) and assurance (teacher knowledge and skill); there was a more diverse range in the sources of dissatisfaction, with assurance (e.g., assessments), responsiveness (e.g., timetabling), and tangibles (e.g., facilities) all frequently cited.

Table 1: Student Reports of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction Within Classes

Theme	Percentage
Satisfaction	
Teachers being kind, friendly and approachable	42%
Teachers being knowledgeable and skilled	35%
Classmates being friendly and supporting each other (within and outside the class)	27%
General teaching methods being engaging and effective	13%

Theme	Percentage
Class atmospheres being warm and friendly	12%
Timetables being convenient	6%
New knowledge and skills being learned	5%
Facilities being modern/convenient	2%
Other	6%
Dissatisfaction	
Class schedules/timetabling being inconvenient	15%
Facilities lacking or being substandard	13%
Teacher behavior	13%
Academic achievement/grades; assessment policies being unreasonable; grading criteria lacking transparency	10%
Topics being uninteresting or not useful	9%
Behavior of other students being disruptive or unpleasant	9%
Workload being too high	8%
Other international students speaking too much in their native language	6%
Teachers lacking professional knowledge/skills	5%
Other	13%

Institutional Context

At the institutional level, the majority of themes related to Parasuraman et al.'s (1991) category of tangibles, and more specifically facilities and resources. Forty-one percent of respondents identified satisfiers relating to facilities and a combined 63% mentioned dissatisfiers (general facilities 33%, computers 15%, lack of parking 15%). Satisfaction arose when key facilities were convenient, useful, comprehensive, clean, and in good condition, and dissatisfaction arose from spaces that were deemed inconvenient, noisy, crowded, or dirty and when a particular key facility was lacking. The most frequently reported satisfier was having access to a purpose-built area for students to both study and interact in socially:

“Besides providing a space for learning, [it] plays a role for people chatting or consulting issues. It is quite multi-functional and people can share ideas during this merging process.”

“The [social/study area] was quite easy to use, with a great number of computers and big tables. People can get access to school website easily. Students can discuss issues in some study rooms, even though they are not easy to book one.”

Apart from access to key resources in such areas (e.g., computers, printers, and kitchen), many students cited satisfaction arising from the functionality of these spaces, and enjoyed student areas that provided for eating and drinking, socializing and engaging in academic activities, including group study and research. Also satisfying was having 24-hr student access to such facilities.

Conversely, students reported dissatisfaction when the availability, functionality, and user experience of a facility was compromised. Particularly frequent were responses citing a lack of convenient parking (15%), reflecting the inner city location of the institution. One student, writing about a small privately run business school, wrote at length about her dissatisfaction at the lack of facilities in that institution and of their low-quality, adding that: “As an international student, I was payed a lots of tuition for my course but the cleanliness in the school is awful: Bathroom always run out toilet paper and students cannot use the elevator in this school.” Discussing a particular incident relating to a lack of computers, she further added a comment relating to the lack of responsiveness of the institution: “It makes me unhappy and nobody answered my complaining in reception.”

Even for students at the larger, better resourced institution, limited space and choices also dampened levels of satisfaction: “The group discussion rooms are too limited and the library computers are always not available. Because I want to use computers in the quiet area and want to discuss issues with my classmates.”

A frequently reported dissatisfier among general facilities was a lack of options in the types of cuisine available on campus and a lack of organized social activities:

“There are not enough tables and there are not healthy food. For example, there is only sushi or fast food. Sometimes, we want to eat some hot and fresh vegetables.”

“There is not a lot of activities. ... I think social activities can improve students’ abilities in communication and make them more aware of local cultures.”

The responsiveness of support services was also frequently discussed. Students identified satisfiers (10%) with the various institutional services available to them, such as those supporting learning (including the opportunity to practice English), international administration, enrollment, study advisories, libraries, information technology, and health services. Often remarked upon was the empathy of staff providing these services, who were variously described as kind, patient, friendly, qualified, and willing to help. Dissatisfaction (5%) related more to students’ personal experiences or a lack of available information and support for international students:

“[I was] somewhat dissatisfied about lack of support for international students. I wish there would be the opportunity to get some advice from senior students.”

“Because when I started my course, I really needed someone, who had already experienced my situation, to get some advice, but I wasn’t able to find anyone.”

In the following case, dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to the support services around homestay accommodation:

“[I feel] very dissatisfied about the support from [team name], because when I had had some problems with my ex-homestay, the staff of [team name] did not support me well. Moreover, I heard some students complained that home

stay before I came. I could not understand why the staff still given them students after few times complained.”

Thus, although tangibles (e.g., facilities) were the dominant theme in the discussion of institutional (dis)satisfiers, empathy and responsiveness were also notably important.

In the presentation of these data, a rather high proportion of responses (18%) have been grouped as “other.” This grouping mostly consists of issues that were raised by a single respondent, such as the perceptions of long waiting times to see a doctor, the institution lacking an international standing, and unfair criteria for receiving scholarships.

Table 2: Student Reports of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with the Institution

Theme	Percentage
Satisfaction	
Facilities being modern/convenient	41%
Learning and study being facilitated	19%
Teachers being helpful	17%
Support services being helpful	10%
Friendships being made	8%
The general experience of being an international student being pleasant/rewarding	8%
The atmosphere being warm	7%
Other	6%
Dissatisfaction	
General facilities lacking, being inconvenient or in poor condition	33%
Computers being insufficient in number and/or in poor condition	15%
Parking options lacking	15%
Social and entertainment activities lacking	7%
Library lacking resources and/or space	5%
Support services being ineffective or unhelpful	5%
Program options and structure	5%
Rules and regulations	4%
Organizational structure and communication	3%
Other	18%

New Zealand Context

The issues influencing satisfaction studying within NZ related particularly to the natural and social environment, interactions with people, and aspects of lifestyle. Of these, the most frequently cited satisfier was being in a clean, unpolluted, and beautiful natural environment (55%). The following is a fairly representative extract identifying a number of typical satisfiers:

Because there is not environment pollution, I can enjoy the air, the sun and the grass. There are a lot of free park, I often do some exercise around a lake. Also, the water is cleaner than our country, I like drink tap water here. Some of us are not good at English, but the Kiwi and other English speaker are patient, we can communicate with them easily.

As in this example, aspects of the natural environment were often favorably contrasted with those of the home country, and positive evaluations of the environment were often mentioned together with the hospitality of locals. Perhaps because of the similarity in the environment that all respondents would have experienced, there were no indications of a corresponding dissatisfaction with such environmental matters, although weather and climate represented as a related dissatisfier (8%).

The theme of hospitable people was evidenced in frequent references to the friendliness and generosity of people during ordinary social interactions (32%):

People here are influenced by this peaceful and patrol surroundings a lot, very patient and friendly. They always keep a placid attitude towards life, no matter what tough difficulties come, New Zealanders are able to tackle them with optimistic moods. And this positive perspective affects me as well. I appreciate it very much. Besides, people here are very friendly and kind. Most of them like helping others who need support.

However, 9% of respondents identified discrimination (mostly in the form of microaggressions) as a key source of dissatisfaction. When followed up on in the interviews, nearly all respondents reported having experienced some form of discrimination (such as perceiving that they had received less polite service than others) but most brushed aside the notion of it impacting on their overall satisfaction. The most serious case was a female student reporting being verbally abused by a stranger, which she found very unsettling.

For many respondents, their closest interactions with New Zealanders occurred in homestay contexts, and it is here that both satisfiers and dissatisfiers involved a particular intensity. When discussing homestays as a satisfier (7%), students focused on the help they received from their homestays, and their general kindness, as illustrated in the following response:

I had a lovely homestay mother. She is a wonderful woman with a big heart, she is the one of the reason I love New Zealand. She is very lovely. She took a great care of me to get used to a new living place.

Similarly, in the interviews, a number of students discussed their positive homestay experiences at length, reflecting on the warmth and inclusivity of the family experience, life-long friendships, and the perception of enormous gains in English proficiency. Nevertheless, although most homestay experiences were positive, when there were problems, at times these had a profoundly negative impact upon the student's study experience and desire to remain in the country; these represented 7% of the NZ dissatisfiers. In such cases, unpalatable food and a lack of support were recurring sources of dissatisfaction, while there were also clashes over household

rules and expected behavior: “The first month I live with the homestay. I think I can’t handle of the food and the way they treat people.”

However, the two most frequently cited forms of dissatisfaction related to a lack of cheap and convenient public transportation (24%) and a perception of insecurity around personal safety and the occurrence of petty crime (15%). The transportation issue had no corresponding satisfier and may represent a unidirectional factor. Personal security was a satisfier for a small number of people (3%), but also appears to be largely unidirectional, becoming notable largely after the experience of petty crime.

Overall, the satisfiers in this category tended to represent tangibles (clean environment) and empathy (welcoming homestays and friendly locals). Tangibles also accounted for the majority of dissatisfiers (e.g., transportation, food, weather/climate).

Table 3: Student Reports of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction within New Zealand

Theme	Percentage
Satisfaction	
The environment being clean and unpolluted, and/or beautiful	55%
People being friendly and welcoming	32%
Social services being good	10%
Lifestyle/pace of life being pleasant	10%
Homestay being warm and friendly	7%
City services/infrastructure being good	5%
Feeling secure	3%
Other	19%
Dissatisfaction	
Public transportation being inconvenient and/or expensive	24%
Feeling insecure and/or experiencing petty crime	15%
Disliking the food/lack of access to favorite foods	10%
Experiencing (or detecting) discrimination	9%
The cost of living being too high	9%
The weather/climate being disagreeable	8%
Experiencing language barriers	6%
Homestay problems	5%
Other	16%

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore the satisfaction of international students at one tertiary education provider, and to do so through their own words, building a picture of the key satisfiers in the class, the institution, and the host country (New Zealand). A feature of the narrative frame approach is that it promotes identification of the top-of-mind issues for respondents, revealing a snapshot of the most important issues for a respondent at a moment in time, and avoiding the priming effect of

specifying which issues the participants can comment on. The open nature of the prompts invites comment on any issue and could potentially raise matters that may be overlooked through more commonly used closed-item methods. Thus, the use of narrative frames seems likely to produce a rather different picture than would be generated through Likert-scale questionnaire responses.

One example of an unexpected finding was related to assessment practices, which represented one of the most frequent class dissatisfiers (9% of responses). Although problems with assessment requirements are well-established (e.g., M. Li, 2016), this appears to be one of the few studies to highlight substantial dissatisfaction with factors such as a lack of grading transparency in essays (see also Grebennikov & Skaines, 2007), and a reported overemphasis on assessment at the expense of teaching. There was some interaction between dissatisfaction with results and dissatisfaction with policy (23%). In terms of tackling such perceptions, transparency may be a particularly vexing issue, given that university tutors tend to tackle essay grading with holistic and largely subjective, “gut-feel” approaches (J. Li, 2012).

Another important issue is evidence of the satisfaction arising from the warmth, patience, and friendliness of the teachers’ general interactional behavior. Although this may not come as a surprise, it is worth noting that the set of class satisfiers is dominated by the interpersonal domains arising from the attitudes and behavior of the teacher (42%) and classmates (27%) and the warmth of the atmosphere (12%). This seems particularly worth emphasizing given the increasing international focus on accountability for maximizing educational effectiveness, and the focus on efficiency that is driving outcomes-based education (Tam, 2014). More specifically, while the educational outcome is undoubtedly crucial, so too is satisfaction with the educational journey. Indeed, from a market-oriented perspective, it may be that it is satisfaction with the journey that generates greater positive word-of-mouth exposure.

Overall, the picture to emerge from this study is that there are a number of “top-of-mind” issues that are consistently reported by international students in NZ in their discussions of satisfiers and—to a somewhat lesser extent—dissatisfiers. In terms of the class experience, reports of satisfaction in this study were primarily based on warm, helpful interactions with the teacher and other students, and with trust in the teacher’s professional competence. Institutional satisfiers were largely based on convenient and attractive facilities, and on helpful interactions with staff. NZ satisfiers were dominated by the perception of a clean, natural environment and positive interactions with people.

As discussed in the next section, reported dissatisfiers vary widely and cannot therefore be readily grouped together. Often, these may be tied to specific experiences. However, at a general level, the most important principles appear to be convenient access to resources and fairness. The first accounts for the main issues at the class, institution, and country levels: timetabling/scheduling, facilities, parking, and transportation. It seems likely that by attending to these obstacles, these sources of dissatisfaction could be relieved; these are not, however, readily solvable, and may require detailed, integrated planning of the services supplied to international students. The second theme, fairness, is not as strongly apparent as the first but also runs through the three contexts, particularly in relation to issues such as assessment

practices, workload, teacher/student behavior, other's use of native languages, discrimination, and crime.

These findings, based largely on the use of narrative frames, present a rather more detailed picture of the issues than those that have previously been reported (e.g., Arambewela & Hall, 2006; Bianchi, 2013; Sam, 2001; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Thus, the use of narrative frames and other more open data collection methods (including that of Bianchi, 2013) appear to provide richer detail that complements the broader brushstrokes of large-scale questionnaires, while also enabling input from a greater number of participants than is generally feasible via interviews (see Ho et al., 2007 for a fairly large-scale interview and focus-group study). In the following sections, the focus turns to discussion of issues that arose in the reporting and analysis of (dis)satisfiers. Although our focus was narrative frames, much of this is relevant more generally to exploring satisfaction via any qualitative approach.

Reporting and Analyzing Satisfying and Dissatisfying Experiences

A noticeable trend across the narrative frame data was that satisfiers were reported in rather general terms, but dissatisfiers were reported in more specific and detailed terms. For instance, in the narrative frames, descriptions of individuals (e.g., homestay mother) and groups (e.g., classmates) were nearly always presented as general characteristics (e.g., kind), yet these descriptions were seldom exemplified through recounting particular events that demonstrated that quality. For example, in discussing class satisfiers, one participant described teachers as being "always very approachable, friendly and I can feel their willingness to help," thereby describing a general, positive characteristic of the types of people she tended to encounter.

Yet, when describing class dissatisfiers, she presented a lengthy description of a specific instance in which the tutor had been absent and no replacement tutor had been scheduled, which she saw as being symptomatic of a lack of communication within that department. Similarly in the interviews, it was more typically the case that satisfiers were illustrated by describing habitual or frequently recurring events while dissatisfiers were very frequently illustrated in detail with a specific critical incident that caused frustration or anguish. For instance, one interviewee reported an overall satisfying homestay experience, but spoke at length about receiving an "angry, definitely angry" lecture-like reprimand from a homestay mother over repeatedly wearing shoes in the house against her instructions.

One possibility is that the occurrence of a large number of positive interactions may become generalized into an overall positive description of a person or group, while negative interactions may have a greater emotional impact and a more pointed implication. Indeed, this is suggested in both the marketing literature relating to satisfaction (e.g., Vargo, Nagao, He, & Morgan, 2007), and in the psychology literature under the concept of *negativity bias*, for which Rozin and Royzman (2001) provide a useful taxonomy. This includes the phenomenon of *negative potency*, whereby a negative event "is subjectively more potent and of higher salience than its positive counterpart" (p. 298), and the notion of *greater negative differentiation*, in which negative experiences may be recalled in greater descriptive and emotional detail than positive experiences of a similar magnitude, as well as the idea of

negativity dominance, whereby negative events are weighted more heavily than positive events in “holistic perception and appraisal” (p. 298). Such tendencies would account for the prominence given in these data to individual negative occurrences or negative evaluations of single individuals (such as a teacher or classmate). These phenomena appear to have implications from both a research methodology perspective and in terms of managing student satisfaction.

As researchers reflecting on the process of conducting an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), it became apparent that we were particularly, and possibly overly, drawn to accounts of dissatisfaction. For instance, in the interview reported above, initially for us the most striking—and reportable—feature of the interviewee’s account of his homestay experience seemed to be the “angry, definitely angry” reprimand from the homestay mother; yet he mentioned this only after describing the overall family experience as very warm, and did so only in response to further questioning, before reiterating his very positive overall evaluation. He also mentioned that he happily resided with the family for more than a year in total. Thus, while the shouting event was undoubtedly important to the student, in our initial analysis we had probably misapprehended—and risked overstating—its significance to him. Although this may reflect our own biases in attempting to improve the student experience, it may also be a common risk that arises in analyzing narrative due to the phenomenon of greater negative differentiation. In further acknowledgement of researcher subjectivity, what may also occur is an interaction between negativity bias and empathy for the interviewee’s experience. We may be biased toward focusing more heavily on an interviewee’s description of being shouted at than her or his account of an enjoyable experience overall. From a methodology perspective, then, it seems important to be aware that in studies of positive and negative experiences, there may be an inherent risk of researchers misrepresenting the participants’ reports of negative events.

CONCLUSION

For multiple reasons, the satisfaction of international students is an issue of major importance to stakeholders of international education, such as parents, teachers, prospective students, ministries of education, and employers. This is increasingly important given the competitive international education market. In asking new questions and exploring the issues in a range of ways, a more rounded picture can emerge of how best to cater to international students to ensure a satisfying and positive living and learning experience in the country of their choice.

In interpreting the present findings, due caution is required in relation to the limitations in the study design. Of particular note is the rather low (10%) response rate from international students at this institution, which means that the findings cannot be generalized to the wider body of international students. Additionally, it is likely that at least some of the specific findings may represent localized issues and therefore may have little resonance in another context.

It is also worth reflecting on the design of the narrative frame, which here divided student experience into the class, the institution, and the country. These categories undoubtedly influence the type of response elicited. For instance, in dividing the

study experience between the class and the institution, it may be that the narrative frame created separate categories that some respondents may otherwise have collapsed. In this case, by eliciting a comment on the institution, it may have promoted commentary on facilities, and by eliciting a commentary on the class it may have discouraged an association with learning as an institutional activity. A number of reasonable alternatives exist, but each will of course build in a different set of biases. Despite this caution, it seems that compared to other forms of data collection typically used in the exploration of student satisfaction, the use of narrative frames provided opportunity for personal responses that more accurately represented international student voices at the vocational educational institute in question. The inherent scaffolding provided by the frames assisted the students, who were all non-native speakers of English, to provide details relevant not only to the study itself, but also to areas of concern that were unanticipated by the researchers, which in turn led to greater investigation via follow-up interviews. Such advantages may be usefully exploited in future studies that focus on participants who may require certain levels of assistance in expressing themselves in languages other than their first language.

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