

**UNIVERSITY STRATEGIC PLANNING**

# SFU: What's Next? Findings from Phase 2

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# SFU: WHAT'S NEXT?

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2022, the SFU: What's Next project has involved cross-disciplinary conversations with a wide variety of stakeholders at Simon Fraser University. This process has been undertaken with the aim of setting a future path for the University, informed by stakeholder values and inputs. Phase 2 of this project involved facilitating round table discussions and analyzing the data that came from those, and this report summarizes the key findings from these conversations.

The first section of the report outlines the methodology and timeline of this research process. Next, the second section is split into four subsections that each explore key findings from community consultations. The first of these addresses SFU's position on the global scale. In this vein, participants discussed SFU's reputation and ranking, and conversations centered on ways to enhance academic excellence at SFU and boost SFU's culture. The second subsection highlights how community engagement at SFU could be advanced, and how SFU can live up to social responsibilities such as furthering reconciliation and addressing the climate crisis. Next, the third subsection explores how SFU could expand access to education for a diverse student population. Lastly, the fourth subsection narrows in on SFU as an institution, overviewing the challenges it faces with internal processes and management, and how it could progress when it comes to working conditions for its employees and contractors. The report concludes with a brief reflection on key challenges and opportunities encountered during the project and bios of each of the three researchers who contributed to this report.

## METHODOLOGY AND TIMELINE

The data used in this study was collected from community consultation sessions held with students, staff, faculty and alumni from Simon Fraser University, over several months between the Spring and Fall of 2022. Sessions took place both virtually and in-person in Vancouver, Burnaby and Surrey, and across several continents where those with connections to SFU now reside. The sets of notes included a mix of bullet points, unattributed quotes, and high-level summaries consolidated by the session facilitators. In total, 28 sets of notes, consisting of approximately 113 pages, were analyzed.

The research process involved two main stages. First, the sets of notes from community sessions were divided among the researchers, and each researcher was assigned three sets to code inductively. In this stage, researchers worked independently to develop and clarify a codebook drawing from the themes that emerged in the sample. At the end of this part, all the researchers worked together to produce a shared codebook that captured all the themes encountered thus far. In the second stage, the researchers coded all the sets of notes assigned to them using the new codebook. Simultaneously, where new, remarkable themes emerged, the researchers made note of this and consulted the other team members on how those should be coded. This stage concluded with a meeting where the researchers shared their findings and determined the report structure and outline.

This approach was selected based on its ability to balance two competing priorities: coding accuracy and efficiency. The first stage allowed researchers to approach the data as neutrally as possible, letting themes emerge. Coding the entire dataset inductively was not feasible given the time constraints of the project and the collaborative nature of writing a shared report, so the second phase allowed for increased efficiency. Overarching themes had already been identified and, through the collective codebook, there was a shared structure to refer back to when synthesizing findings.

The research process took place over seven weeks. In the first week, the researchers met to align on the project plan and timeline. The second week was spent coding the sample sets of notes, and the team came together to create their shared codebook in week three. The fourth and fifth weeks were spent coding the data according to the collective codebook. Finally, in week six, the researchers met again to discuss findings and begin writing this report, which was completed in week seven.

## FINDINGS

Across community sessions, several topics arose repeatedly in conversations with participants. This section will explore these themes in depth, beginning with SFU's position on the global scale and how this relates to the University's culture. The following part examines SFU as a key player in local and national communities: how the University participates in community engagement, and the responsibilities it has to stakeholders outside of academia. Next, multidimensional questions about educational access are raised, as this was another key topic of discussion for participants. Finally, the last part in this section summarizes important insights about internal processes and management at SFU, including how SFU functions as a workplace.

### **SFU on the Global Scale: Reputation, Excellence, and Culture**

SFU's reputation around the world and status in national and global rankings were major points of focus for participants in several sessions. Participants often highlighted that the quality of education and research happening at the University deserves to be recognized around the globe. While SFU continues to lead in Canadian rankings and is well-known within British Columbia, these participants suggested that further attention should be paid to expanding its global reach.

Moving from the abstract to the specific, participants discussed two key themes that relate to enhancing recognition of SFU. First, academic excellence was one dimension of the University that participants were especially enthusiastic about. Many conversations here centered on the innovative models that SFU has developed and should continue building on. Participants mentioned how valuable experiential learning opportunities like co-op placements and community engaged research are. As well, participants noted that SFU has an admirable reputation for knowledge mobilization, through producing and sharing academic work beyond the walls of the academy.

In terms of improvements to academic priorities, participants expressed interest in new academic programs such as a law school, medical school or veterinary school, and mentioned that further opportunities for inter-university collaboration with other institutions could be enhanced. As well, participants argued for continued updates to traditional academic structures. As one participant contended, SFU should be re-imagined “as a university pushing the boundaries of online learning, research engagement and community engagement across the province, Canada and globally.”

Culture is another aspect of the University that relates to its reputation. In discussions with participants, Simon Fraser University’s shared culture and community — among students, staff, faculty and alumni — was a key topic of discussion. Participants repeatedly noted their pride at being part of the SFU community and participating in activities and events, such as convocations, that were some of their fondest memories of their time at the University. From a practical perspective, many participants highlighted that SFU alumni are often at the forefront of positive change in the world, and more effort could be made to track where alumni go after leaving the University. Further, SFU’s alumni network could be leveraged to connect SFU members around the world and provide rewarding job opportunities for new grads.

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One final topic to mention in this section, which was raised in conjunction with the themes discussed above, is the question of physical infrastructure. Conversations with participants demonstrated that continuing to build and improve SFU's physical spaces and facilities is a necessity that enables other developments. For example, new academic programs create the need for new space and facilities, while improving campus community areas to provide more spaces for socializing — especially considering the disruptions caused by COVID-19 — can play a role in enhancing SFU's culture. While SFU is often seen as a commuter school, one participant explained that “we should try to recapture the desirability of the campus as a destination.”

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## **SFU in the Neighbourhood: Community Engagement and Social Responsibility**

While SFU is, at its core, a University, many participants highlighted that considering its position in the communities it serves, it is also more than that. Community engagement was a major theme that arose in such conversations. Participants recognized that research at SFU has been informed by the nonacademic community, and some programs have been responsive to community demands.

When it comes to students, many participants emphasized that the University should continue fostering the next generation of global citizens who are equipped to tackle real world problems. In this regard, student interactions with the community through courses and projects allow for experiential learning opportunities and provide them with critical tools to become responsible members of society after graduation. As well, participants remarked that facilities and programming such as the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue and SFU Public Square contribute to fostering public intellectualism beyond the boundaries of the University.

Meanwhile, many participants explained that community engagement should be strengthened through academic and administrative procedures. For example, while connections with community partners are necessary to build community

engaged learning programs, there is little recognition for the work that goes into cultivating and maintaining such relationships when it comes to tenure and promotion criteria. As well, several participants argued that academic models for research ethics, publication, and funding must be updated to honour community partners as co-contributors rather than subjects. Implementing specific changes to such processes can help clarify what engagement means at SFU, as the vagueness surrounding taglines such as “engaging the world” was also a crucial point of conversation. Without material changes to these types of academic procedures, community engagement risks being surface level.

Participants also noted that SFU has responsibilities to the surrounding community and to the world. For example, one participant highlighted that during floods in late 2021, SFU “partnered with nearby communities to provide food to locations affected by the flooding. Making efforts to make more community outreach and support would [make] a difference.” Beyond supporting the community during acute periods of crisis, participants also emphasized that SFU has an ongoing duty to “lead on sustainability initiatives, responsible investing, and lowering our carbon footprint.” Many participants argued that SFU could be doing more when it comes to environmental sustainability, such as pursuing net zero emissions and publicly rejecting the Trans Mountain pipeline. In this sense, its responsibility goes beyond specific events.

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Related to concerns about sustainability, participants also touched on SFU's relationship to Indigenous communities and the need for increased prioritization of reconciliation and decolonization. For example, participants mentioned that improved access to the University for Indigenous communities — both in terms of admissions and hiring — would have positive impacts. This could be facilitated through tuition waiver programs and housing assistance. As well, participants argued that SFU could build stronger relationships with Indigenous communities and incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, such as land-based learning, into curricula. Meanwhile, although participants were enthusiastic about the recent Varsity team name change, many also highlighted the need to go further and change the University's name, considering its colonial origins. Some participants used the example of Toronto Metropolitan University as a school that has successfully undertaken such a project.

## **SFU for Students: Access to Education**

Another prominent theme brought up by participants was that of access to education. While SFU is known for academic excellence, as discussed earlier, it has simultaneously garnered attention as an institution capable of breaking down barriers and welcoming a diverse student body. According to many participants, SFU campuses in Vancouver and Surrey have allowed the University to be connected to the communities it aims to serve, and several participants voiced support for opening more campuses across the province.

On the day-to-day level, participants mentioned that flexible learning options contribute to widening access and should be expanded further. The COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness around online education, and participants proposed a range of ideas that would build on the lessons learned during the previous two years. These ranged from creating entirely virtual campus environments to simply using online modes of instruction as a complement to face-to-face learning. Participants noted that the power of virtual learning is especially critical for students who balance school with other priorities such as work and family. From the perspective of the student population, participants argued that SFU could do more to expand programming for those who are not considered as 'typical' students, such as mid-career adults, or younger high school students who are community leaders and would benefit from the resources available at the University.



Educational access is an inherently multidimensional issue. For example, affordability — especially for international students, considering expensive tuition fees — was another major concern among participants that touches on the question of access. One participant argued that a valuable exercise for the University may be to look “for alternative ways to fund budgets and generate revenue rather than putting much of the burden on students.” To get around economic barriers to access, some participants suggested that SFU could take the lead from other prestigious universities who have published course content online for free, accessible to those who would not normally be able to afford such an education. Affordability is also an issue for students and their families when it comes to peripheral expenses, such as housing and food, considering that the Lower Mainland is one of the most expensive places to live in the country.

Two key themes reverberated throughout many conversations. For one, participants often highlighted the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the University. Reducing the barriers mentioned above is particularly important when considering accessibility for historically marginalized or underrepresented groups at the University. Participants touched on both the importance of diverse admissions processes as well as the criticality of ensuring that students are given the resources to excel throughout their time at SFU. This includes, for example, providing culturally sensitive (such as Indigenous health care) support for students’ mental and physical health and wellbeing.

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Secondly, improving physical infrastructure is also a critical component of facilitating access to education. In this regard, many participants mentioned how the gondola would improve access for commuter students (who make up a large part of the SFU student body) and building new or expanding current student residences would ease the challenges caused by the housing crisis in the Lower Mainland. Physical infrastructure was also related to concerns about physical accessibility, where participants noted that campus spaces and events must be made accessible to all members of the community.

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## **SFU as an Institution: Bureaucratic Processes and the Workplace**

It is easy to forget that universities themselves are places to work that struggle with bureaucratic and labour-related challenges like any other institution. This was a major point of discussion among participants, who touched on several dimensions of SFU’s management systems. One of the most common concerns raised was the need for enhanced transparency and communication between different layers of the university. Several participants commented that resisting silos is critical, and facilitating dialogue and collaboration across units could help prevent silo-ization. As well, participants emphasized that ensuring cohesion between administrative communications and work on the ground is another challenge. This must involve administrators regularly consulting those on the front lines, and, as one participant noted, SFU should “ensure all departmental, unit, division, [and] Faculty plans link back to SFU’s strategic plan.”

Participants also expressed the importance of aligning ideals with action and resource allocation. According to many participants, SFU’s goals are laudable but must be implemented properly, for example by ensuring adequate infrastructure (such as IT resources) and budget allocations are provided to achieve results. Despite existing needs,

participants mentioned that proposals are sometimes not approved because there is a lack of funding or an overly cautious aversion to risk. Participants remarked that SFU is seen as, and should continue to be, an innovative institution that embraces change: for many, this involves being open to new ideas. Even if some projects are not ultimately realized, participants maintained that ambitious leadership and innovation can propel future success.

Labour issues were another key theme that participants raised in discussions. On a fundamental level, participants mentioned that SFU should strive to be a Living Wage employer, which would help staff and faculty afford the cost of living in the surrounding area and enhance retention. As well, participants argued that SFU should resist precarious labour practices such as repeatedly hiring teaching staff like sessionals on short-term contracts. These types of concerns are particularly critical for postdoctoral researchers and their families, who struggle to make ends meet with often inadequate compensation and must contend with insecure conditions. Across workers at the University, participants mentioned that it is crucial to both standardize contract language in some cases (for example, for postdocs) while allowing for workers' flexibility and autonomy considering the fast-moving and ever-changing nature of the University. Participants also emphasized the importance of work-life balance and noted that hiring additional team members is

often necessary to prevent workloads from ballooning. In this sense, as one participant indicated, addressing work-related issues is often a matter of "building up resiliency and resources — [we] need more resources, not just patchwork fixes." Finally, participants highlighted that greater effort could be made to strengthen working conditions. This includes basic practices such as ensuring that spaces are adequately maintained, as well as more advanced undertakings like providing increased support for health and wellness and expanding opportunities for continuous professional development.

## REFLECTIONS

With any project, there are inevitably certain challenges that present themselves throughout the process. In this case, the main challenge emerged during data analysis. While qualitative research is often done through collecting full recordings or transcripts from focus groups and interviews, we used sets of notes that had been taken during the round table sessions. This format was logical considering that recording participants can reduce their comfort level, but also meant that rich context - on which qualitative researchers often rely - was sometimes missing. As well, the fact that some notes were captured in a handwritten format or as screenshots of online discussion also made coding challenging at times.

These seemingly mundane issues relate to the broader research process of this phase of SFU: What's Next, where research assistants were brought on after data collection. In the future, we recommend that RAs be involved from the beginning and contribute to research design, developing research questions, and facilitating community sessions. This would allow SFU to leverage the skills of the research assistants more thoroughly.

Despite the challenges we faced, there were positive aspects of the experience that the research team wanted to recognize here. First, all of us were grateful to have the privilege of hearing so many perspectives about Simon Fraser University, a place we each cherish. As well, working with a diverse team of researchers was a wonderful opportunity. We each brought a range of experiences and academic backgrounds to the table in our work and learned a lot through being able to share ideas with one another. We hope that this report can contribute to building a better and bolder SFU.

## THE TEAM

### Catherine Jeffery

(Lead Research Assistant)

Catherine recently finished her Master of Arts in Communication, where she wrote her thesis on new financial technologies with a focus on the digitization of personal finance. During her time at SFU, Catherine was a teaching assistant and a peer facilitator with the Research Commons, as well as being active in her graduate caucus. Now, she works at a sustainability ratings provider in Toronto, mobilizing the skills and knowledge she gained through her graduate studies to build sustainability programs with companies across North America.

### Elina Jin

(Research Assistant)

Elina is an SFU alumna holding a Master of Arts in Global Humanities. In her graduate thesis, she investigated university students' online self-study behaviors, and discussed equity agendas of online learning within dominant learning cultures in China. At SFU, she has been learning, teaching, researching, and volunteering in multiple capacities, including Student Services, Centre for Educational Excellence, ISTLD, Global Asia program, Department of Global Humanities. As an intercultural educator, she expects to practice and advance equitable participation of teaching and learning locally/globally, physically/virtually.

### Stan Hetalo

(Research Assistant)

Stan is a PhD Candidate in Economics with primary interests in Applied Microeconomics, specifically, environmental and labour economics. His current research links wildfire smoke and labour market outcomes, such as hours worked, across Canadian workers. While advancing his doctoral research, Stan has also been educating diverse student groups as a teaching assistant in the department of Economics. Furthermore, he is an enthusiastic research assistant on another exciting project related to his dissertation topic.

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