



International Students' University to Work Transition: Research-in-Brief

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Abstract

International students are increasingly seeking to attend Canadian educational institutions and the Canadian government has signaled its intention to make international students an important part of immigration policy. Yet, international students often face barriers when integrating into the workforce and many decide to return to their country of origin. In this paper we detailed the preliminary findings from the doctoral thesis underway by the first author, including the results from interviews with seven international students who graduated more than two years but less than nine years ago. We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2014) to conceptualize the study of how former international students transition to the workforce. The findings from this study offered insights into the influences that were important as they navigated immigration issues related to their transition to the workforce. Keywords: international students; university-to-work transition; post-secondary

Introduction

Educational institutions are recruiting greater numbers of international students and immigration policy focuses on

retaining them as highly skilled immigrants (CBIE, 2014). The Canadian federal government implemented policies intended to attract educated immigrant workers and address skilled labour shortages (Denton & Spencer, 2009). In Canada and in other countries, such as Australia, international students are considered to be ideal immigrants because they often have international experience and credentials gained in their home countries, as well as credentials and education in the Canadian context (CBIE, 2014; Ziguras & Law, 2006). Presumably, international students should have a relatively easier time integrating into the Canadian workforce, but researchers have found many of the same barriers experienced by other immigrants in securing employment commensurate to their skill level, resulting in un/under-employment (Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Consequently, international students face a unique and complex education-to-employment transition related to their goals of employment and immigration to Canada. Beyond international students' initial adjustment experiences, few studies have explored their career development (Arthur, 2007; 2017). Particularly, there is a major gap in the literature about the resources needed to support their university-to-work transition. As such, the current study investigated the university-to-work transition experiences of international students in order to shed light

on complementary avenues for innovating career counselling, which, in turn, may help facilitate a successful workforce transition.

Method

Theoretical Underpinnings

We used Systems Theory Framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014) to conceptualize this study and its findings, as it emphasizes the meanings individuals give to their career decisions, based on their past and present actions, as well as future aspirations. STF considers the cultural, societal, and familial context in which those decisions, actions, and aspirations take shape. For the research method, we selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA aligns with STF as we, the authors, conceptualize an individual's understanding of, and action in, the world as resulting from the reciprocal influence of the interaction between personal and contextual factors. Specifically, Smith et al. (2009) noted that IPA synthesizes both descriptive phenomenology (i.e., focusing on the way phenomena subjectively appear to individuals in their lived experience) and hermeneutics (i.e., understanding individuals' mindset and language that mediates these lived experiences). Additionally, IPA is idiographic in that it gives voice to single cases and their unique contexts. Given the focus and strengths of

STF and IPA, we determined the overarching research question was, how do former international students make sense of their university-to-work transition? More specifically, how do they make sense of the role of education and work in their lives through this transition?

Participants

We recruited participants through university Career Services, social media advertisements (e.g., Facebook), and snowball sampling. To-date, we have interviewed seven former international students, including five women and two men, all of whom have been living in Canada for more than two, but less than nine, years post-graduation. We deemed this period as important in order to capture the transition experiences of those who are pursuing permanent immigration to Canada. Areas of country of origin included one from Africa, three from Asia, two from the Middle East, and one from South America. For highest level of education, three participants had a bachelor's degree and four had a master's degree. Fields of study were one each from construction, engineering, and finance, and two each from healthcare, and university administration. We recorded and transcribed the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Preliminary Findings

According to the analytic focus of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), the analytic process involved (a) noting initial impressions, (b) developing emerging themes, (c) looking for connections across themes, and (d) searching for patterns

across cases. Although there were many themes that emerged from participants' experiences, one of the key themes highlighted by all participants was their experiences with the immigration process. Participants anchored their experience during the time when they first sought their study permit to become international students in Canada. Participants differed greatly in their expectations of, experiences with, and ways of handling their immigration process, some having greater success than others. They shared in common the experience of being 'othered' by the immigration process; they were prohibited from fully joining the communities into which they were supposed to be integrating.

Specifically, Olivia recalled her frustration that the study permit limited her ability to work, which impacted her living conditions. Olivia explained that she quickly came to understand that many Canadians had the stereotype that international students were wealthy and she stressed how, in her case, she had worked for years beforehand to save for her education. For Olivia, working was essential to staying in Canada to study and as such she was constantly worried about lacking funds and needing to leave mid-study. Iris noted that it was not until she returned to university to complete a master's degree after working in Canada post-graduation from her undergraduate degree that she found out that she could not re-apply for the post-graduation work permit. As such, since graduating from her master's degree, Iris has been stuck in limbo, unable to work, waiting for her permanent residency application to be processed.

Shaun joined the workforce through the post-graduation work permit and was able to use this time

and experience to secure permanent residency and, eventually, citizenship. Yet, Shaun disclosed that regardless of being a citizen, he was one of the first people that his former employer laid off during economic downturn, while his Canadian-born, less educated, shorter-tenured, white-peers remained employed. Shaun reflected on whether he would ever really be considered Canadian or if people would continue to see him as an immigrant. In spite of the challenges found in these experiences, all participants reflected that, now, they could not envision living and working elsewhere. As Amber put it: "I can't imagine going back... the kind of freedom here... you can decide your life. So for me, I was fully integrated and this culture clicked with me... I'm more Canadian now than non-Canadian... I wouldn't recognize the old me."

An overarching interpretation of this dedication to staying in Canada is that these international students did not come to Canada for the single purpose of education; though their experiences, their sense of nationality and belonging transformed. This change in identity seemed to empower participants to persevere through the immigration process in order to remain in Canada.

Implications and Conclusion

As the attention paid to the recruitment of international students increases in Canada and other parts of the world, the need for appropriate, relevant, and helpful career development services for international students will also grow (Arthur, 2017; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). The participants in this study reported facing additional transition barriers to the Canadian

workforce due to their precarious immigration status. As such, understanding the experiences of international students who are transitioning from university to work in the current economic setting is crucial to creating appropriate support services (e.g., immigration and career advice). As well, the participants in this study indicated having piece-meal information about the complex Canadian immigration system and wishing they had had greater guidance from knowledgeable sources. This is an area that career practitioners or other university services personnel might be able to address in their work with international students, particularly as university services are typically the point of contact for international students. Although this study provided preliminary insights into the experiences of international students as they move into the workforce, additional research is needed. For example, researchers could examine how international students prepare for employment while they are students, during the immediate years following graduation, and the influences on their decision not to pursue employment and/or immigration in the Canadian context. Research can inform education, workforce and governmental policies that support international students for inclusive integration into the Canadian workforce.

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