

Career development influences of international students who pursue permanent immigration to Canada

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Abstract This research focused on the career decision and planning needs of a unique group of migrants: international students who are completing their studies as temporary immigrants and who are embarking on the career journey of employment and permanent immigration. A semi-structured interview employing a Critical Incident Technique was used to assess the career influences of 19 undergraduate and graduate international students at a Canadian university. Data were analyzed using a constant comparison method and critical incident protocol. Students were motivated to remain in Canada due to enhanced job opportunities and high standard of living. Barriers to migration included the fear of not securing employment and cultural and linguistic barriers. International students would like to see campus and career services specified to the needs of international and graduate students to help them realize their goal of pursuing employment as the key to permanent immigration.

Résumé. Les influences du développement de carrière des étudiants internationaux qui recherche à immigrer de manière permanente au Canada. Les étudiants étrangers qui terminent leurs études en tant qu'immigrants temporaires et qui se lancent dans leur carrière professionnelle et dans l'immigration permanente représentent un groupe unique de migrants qui ont des besoins particuliers en ce qui concerne les choix professionnels et la planification de carrière. Une entretien semi-structuré utilisant une Technique des Incidents Critiques a été utilisée pour évaluer l'influence de carrière de 19 étudiants internationaux de premier et de deuxième cycle dans une université de l'ouest du Canada. Les données ont été analysées en utilisant une comparaison constante et un protocole d'incident critique. Les étudiants étaient motivés à rester au Canada au vu des bonnes opportunités d'emploi ainsi que du haut niveau de vie. Les obstacles à la migration comprenait la peur de ne pas

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obtenir un emploi et les barrières culturelles et linguistiques. Les étudiants internationaux aimeraient voir apparaître des services du campus et d'orientation spécifiques aux besoins des étudiants internationaux et de deuxième cycle afin de les aider à réaliser leur objectif d'obtenir un emploi puisque c'est la clé d'une immigration permanente.

Zusammenfassung. Einflüsse auf die Karriereentwicklung von internationalen Studierenden, die eine dauerhafte Zuwanderung nach Kanada anstreben. Internationale Studierende, die ihr Studium als temporäre Einwanderer abschließen und den Karriereweg der Beschäftigung und dauerhaften Zuwanderung angehen, stellen eine einzigartige Gruppe von Migranten mit besonderen Bedürfnissen der beruflichen Entscheidung und Planung dar. Ein semi-strukturiertes Interview unter Verwendung einer Critical Incident Technik wurde verwendet, um die Einflüsse auf die Karriereentwicklung von 19 internationalen Studierenden und Doktorierenden an einer Universität im Westen Kanadas zu erheben. Die Daten wurden mit Hilfe eines konstanten Vergleichs und Critical Incident-Protokolls analysiert. Studierende waren durch verbesserte Beschäftigungsmöglichkeiten und hohen Lebensstandard motiviert, in Kanada zu bleiben. Hindernisse für die Migration beinhalteten die Angst, keine Beschäftigung zu finden sowie kulturelle und sprachliche Barrieren. Internationale Studierende möchten gerne Campus und Career Service-Dienstleistungen, die auf die Bedürfnisse der internationalen Studierenden und Doktoranden spezifiziert sind, um ihnen zu helfen, ihr Ziel des Strebens nach Beschäftigung als Schlüssel für die dauerhafte Zuwanderung zu verwirklichen.

Resumen. Las influencias del desarrollo profesional de estudiantes internacionales en búsqueda de una migración permanente en Canadá. Esta investigación se focaliza sobre la orientación profesional y el plan de carrera de un grupo único: estudiantes internacionales que están completando sus estudios como inmigrantes temporales y que se están embarcando en el camino profesional del empleo y la migración permanente. Una entrevista semi-estructurada utilizando la Técnica de Incidente Crítico fue utilizada para evaluar las influencias profesionales de 19 estudiantes de pre-grado y post-grado en una Universidad Canadiense. Los datos fueron analizados gracias al método de Comparación Contante y al Protocolo de Incidente Crítico. La motivación de los estudiantes para radicarse en Canadá se basaba en las oportunidades de empleo y las buenas condiciones de vida. Las barreras de inmigración incluían el miedo hacia la falta de empleo seguro y hacia la presencia de barreras culturales y lingüísticas. Los estudiantes internacionales quisieran obtener servicios de campus et de orientación profesional específicos a las necesidades de estudiantes internacionales de post-grado con el objetivo de ayudarles a alcanzar su meta de búsqueda de trabajo como la clave para la inmigración permanente.

Keywords International students · Immigration · Career counselling

Introduction

The mobility of students between countries is a key priority for the internationalization of educational institutions (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2007). More than 160,000 international students are enrolled annually in educational programs in Canada, with approximately 90,000 international students enrolled in universities (McMullen & Elias, 2011). International students make up approximately 7% of full-time undergraduate and almost 20% of students enrolled in graduate programs (AUCC, 2007). Canadian universities attract international students from more than 200 countries; the top 10 source countries are the People's Republic of China, Republic of Korea, United States, France, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mexico (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2009). International students make substantial contributions to local educational institutions beyond tuition revenue, including resources for internationalization of curriculum, contacts for future recruitment and alumni projects, and networks for longer-term international relations (Arthur, 2003a; Francis, 1993; Knight, 1994).

The focus on international students has expanded from their contributions as temporary immigrants, to their human capital potential as permanent skilled immigrants (Hawthorne, 2006; Industry Canada, 2002). Canada's immigration policies are linked to our country's position in the new global economy that is characterized by knowledge, information, and technology (Chen, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2005). In the global "skills race," international students are ranked as attractive migrants for four reasons (Ziguras & Law, 2006). First, international students could increase the recruiting country's pool of highly skilled workers, and support economic development. Second, the declining birth rates and ageing populations in most economically developed societies support strategic recruitment of younger people who are at the beginning of their work lives. Third, international students who are graduates of local educational institutions are more attractive for employment than foreign graduates without local experience. International students bring expertise regarding labour practices and customs from their home country and, as a result of studying in Canada, acquire valuable local experience. Fourth, the prospect of migration can be used as a marketing advantage to recruit additional fee-paying international students. These reasons suggest reciprocal influences between the contributions of international students as learners and as future workers in Canada's skilled labour force.

Immigration policy now permits international students to work in Canada while they are students and for 3 years post-graduation. These changes to employment policies were made to increase the qualifications of international students for immigration under the Canadian Experience Class (CIC, 2008). Consequently, international students face a critical career decision about transitioning from their temporary immigration status to pursuing employment in Canada and permanent residency. However, what has not been researched is the linkage between changing immigration policy and policies pertaining to institutional programs and services in higher education. Existing literature suggests that more comprehensive approaches to addressing the career development needs of international students are needed,

especially when considering decisions to pursue employment and immigration to Canada.

In the current study, we sought to expand knowledge regarding the career planning and decision-making of international students. We investigated the experiences of international students, as they consider the career decision to pursue employment and permanent immigration to Canada. As career options for international students expand, documenting their experiences is important for informing future policy and program planning.

Career development and international students

Research on international students in the fields of higher education and psychology has predominately focused on demographic profiles of source countries and on their problems of adjustment, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, language and academic issues (Arthur, 2008; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). Their adjustment issues have been framed by models of culture shock (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1995), acculturation (Berry, 2001, 2008) and stress and coping (Chen, 1999). Research on the experiences of international students has typically emphasized the initial phase of cross-cultural adjustment. Minimal research is available about the experiences of international students in the final stage of their educational programs, and available studies focus on preparation for re-entry to the home culture (Arthur, 2003b, 2008; Leung, 2007).

Arthur (2007, 2008) linked the career planning and decision-making needs of international students to three phases of the transition process: (a) managing the cross-cultural transition of entering a new culture, (b) learning in a new cultural context, and (c) transferring international expertise to work settings in the host or home countries. In the first phase, international students engage in career planning and decision-making through investigating study abroad opportunities, enrolling in higher education, selecting an academic program, and developing strategies for academic success. In the second phase, international education provides students with cultural learning through exposure to new curriculum and lifestyles. Students may confirm their original vocational pathways, or alternatively, experience dilemmas about what options to pursue for their future (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Singaravelu, White, & Bringaze, 2005). New cultural learning may prompt an examination of personal identity, values conflicts, and academic and employment goals. In the third phase, new career planning issues may emerge when students approach the end of their educational programs. For example, when international students intend to return home, they may seek assistance with career services such as job searching and learning ways to transfer their educational experiences to their home countries (Shen & Herr, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). In Canada, international students can expand their career plans by applying for a post-graduation work permit to enhance their qualifications for permanent immigration under the Canadian Experience Class (CIC, 2008). The literature suggests four implications for policy and practice. First, if the main motives for studying abroad are linked to academic and employment goals, then from the time of arriving in the host country, students should be preparing for future career options. Second,

international students need to develop career planning and decision-making skills. Third, programs and services are required to help international students plan for their current and future career choices. Fourth, policy makers and personnel who work with international students need to be informed about appropriate resources and methods of guidance for career planning and decision-making.

Method

In this study, we aimed to incorporate international students' perspectives about the transition from studying to working and immigrating to the host country. The research focused on identifying the factors that support international students to pursue employment and permanent immigration to Canada. Additional research questions focused on the facilitators and barriers international students perceive as central to their career planning and decision-making, the ways in which current programs and practices help international students to successfully transition from school to employment in Canada, and recommendations by international students to improve programs and services related to their career development.

Participants

Participants were 19 undergraduate and graduate international students at a large university in western Canada: 11 men, 8 women; aged 21–38 years ($M = 28.4$, $SD = 5.28$); from China (8), India (3), Mexico (2), Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Peru, Iran, Columbia, and Taiwan. Student educational levels were doctoral (16%), master's (68%), and undergraduate (16%). Length of time studying in Canada ranged from 0.5 to 6 years ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.52$). Eight participants were married and five reported having a partner.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the university at which it was conducted. The participants were recruited from the institution's Centre for International Students during their final year of academic studies. Prospective participants were contacted via a general e-mail message from the Centre sent out to all international students on their list-serve. This e-mail included information about the purpose of the study and the compensation for participation. Students were asked to arrange a time with the second author to meet and be interviewed; they were compensated \$30 for their time. The researchers received a total of 26 responses, 19 of whom were interviewed. The results of this study are drawn from the perspectives of international students in their final semester of their international education program. International students participating in this study will also be contacted for a follow-up interview a second time during the first year of employment post-graduation in Canada. This will allow for comparisons of the factors taken into account by students at two stages of their career planning and decision-making.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview that included the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to investigate the influences on international students' career planning and decision-making in detail. Participants were asked 12 open-ended questions in English by the second author and then asked to report a critical incident related to career influences (see [Appendix](#)). Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 min and was recorded. After the semi-structured interview questions were posed, the interviewer asked participants a general question, inviting them to add any additional information they felt was relevant for the topic of the study. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist, who signed an oath of confidentiality regarding use of interview material.

Critical incident technique

Derived from the case study method and early work of Flanagan (1954), critical incidents are brief descriptions of vivid events that people remember as being meaningful in their experience (Brookfield, 1995). Critical incidents (CI) support examination of learning in cross-cultural interactions (Arthur, 2003b; Guo, Arthur, & Lund, 2010; Pedersen, 1995), and have been used extensively in career development research (Amundson, Borgen, Jordan, & Erlebach, 2004; Arthur, Collins, McMahon, & Marshall, 2009). Essentially, using the CIT in this study was intended to support investigation about the process of career development. Rather than relying on checklists of predetermined items or standardized measures, the CIT provides a “running commentary” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 114) of meaningful events and reactions to those events. Further, the use of the CIT is helpful in eliciting information about service and program modification (Brookfield, 1995), a key aim of this research.

Participants were encouraged to choose a unique, outstanding experience, in response to the following prompt: “Give an example of a situation (i.e., an important event, something that happened, or something that you learned, any situation that you feel was important for you) that helped you to decide to pursue employment/immigration to Canada.” The following open-ended questions were also posed to provide some structured parameters for the CI and to encourage participants to elaborate on their descriptions: 1. What were you doing/thinking/feeling? 2. What was your role in this situation? 3. Who else was involved? 4. What stands out for you about this situation? 5. What was going well for you in this situation? 6. What difficulties were you experiencing in this situation? 7. What did you learn from this situation? 8. How do you see this situation as related to your plans and decision-making to work in Canada and/or immigrate to Canada?

Data analysis

Data collected from the 12 open-ended interview questions were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1981) and frequency analysis. The second author first read each participant's answers in full

and then created several tables to tabulate the frequency of participants' responses to all 12 questions. She compared participants' answers, noting commonalities in language such that some answers could be considered the same. For instance, answers to the question, "What has prompted you to consider staying in Canada after graduation?" included "better job opportunities" and "better job prospects." These answers were considered the same and simply termed "better job opportunities."

The CI were addressed by adhering as closely as possible to Flanagan's (1954) and Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio's (2005) prescribed protocol. The frame of reference for the CI in this study was that the data in this study will be used to inform career counsellors and campus support services of important factors influencing international students' decisions to pursue employment/immigration to Canada post-graduation. The second author used constant comparison to formulate categories from the data. First, she read through the transcribed incidents two times, noting and highlighting general factors (in participants' words) that related to the study's frame of reference. In the process of category formulation, she was mindful of the purpose for which the data was collected (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954); this informed her decisions regarding the specificity level of her categories.

She used inductive reasoning to note the similarities and differences among the CI. She used constant comparison to group similar incidents together and code the data into themes. To ensure the trustworthiness in the coding process, a person familiar with CIT (i.e., the first author) examined 25% of the CI to establish consensus about what the second author thought was a critical incident and what she thought was a critical incident. After the data was coded independently (i.e., by the second author), it was reviewed by a second coder (i.e., the first author) to guard against coding drift. Additionally, the themes were coded with a record of how many participants contributed related content from the data. The participation rate for all four themes was calculated and determined to be over 25%, the recommended rate for a category or theme to be considered valid (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). The authors strengthened the descriptive validity of the data by working directly from the transcripts as a way of accurately reproducing the participants' words (Butterfield et al., 2005).

Results

Table 1 displays results from the interviews to illustrate some of the key facilitators and barriers involved in international students' decisions to pursue employment in Canada post-graduation. Selected participant quotes from the CI illustrate four core themes that are complimentary to the interview results: enhanced quality of life, career-related opportunities, enhanced work environment, and safety and political stability.

The primary reasons prompting international students to consider staying in Canada after graduation were better job opportunities (than in the home country) and the high quality of life afforded. Ultimately, international students themselves made the decision to remain in Canada post-graduation; however, these decisions

Table 1 Facilitators and barriers for international students' career decision-making

Theme	Example
Enhanced quality of life	<p>F. "We have some friends and they have been in Canada for maybe five or six years. And I look at them and their lives are much better than it could be in Mexico" (A., age 35)</p> <p>F. "So I have a choice and that is helpful. A choice of where to go and work and live" (H., age 26)</p> <p>B. "I don't have much [<i>sic</i>] Canadian friends, I don't have much experience of mixing with Canadian people. And also, my English is not very good" (M., age 23)</p> <p>B. "The culture – at the beginning everything is sweet, but maybe after six months [of] living here, we find that the way that people live here is completely different than in my country" (A. age 35)</p>
Career-related opportunities	<p>F. "A lot of people are helping me. Like my professor in my faculty and also my supervisor. And also my supervisor for my practicum" (C., age 21)</p> <p>F. "I have heard that the government has certain programs and opportunities to students, international students to gain experience and eventually to stay and work here in Canada" (R., age 32)</p> <p>B. "It's difficult because when you are an immigrant, well, you cannot speak, right?" (A. age 35)</p> <p>B. "I know that the biggest barrier for me is that I don't have any immigration visa and I'm also not a Canadian citizen" (C., age 21)</p>
Enhanced work environment	<p>F. "I think maybe less competition than in China, because you know China has tons and tons of people there" (H., age 26)</p> <p>B. "I don't think the companies are aware of how to make things actually work with immigration and students and how to sponsor people to stay here in Canada. It's been a little bit of a struggle to sit in front of a human resource person and tell them what they should do and how to do it. So I don't think too many people are knowledgeable in how the immigration process actually works. I found quite a few people, they say they are qualified and certified in immigration problems, but I honestly don't think they really know how things work" (A., age 35)</p>
Safety and political stability	<p>F. "I like that everything has a law and there's a system of which everything happens. And it's just easy, like anything you need is online. It makes things a lot easier and clearer, so you know that you can't be cheated or these are your rights" (J., age 34)</p>

F facilitator, *B* barrier. There were no barriers offered by participants for the theme of safety and political stability

were influenced by both parents and partners, indicating the importance of relationships for career decision-making. All participants expressed the positive support they received from their parents to study abroad. That support extended to pursuing employment and permanent immigration to Canada. As one participant noted, "They [parents would] like me to stay in Canada. They say, 'If you don't want to stay, why [did] you go abroad in the first place?'".

When asked to describe any barriers they had experienced in the process of deciding to stay in Canada, many participants noted cultural barriers, language in particular. As one participant noted, "For example, I mean after five years or ten

years, I still speak English as a foreigner. And I still can't understand some cultural things. Yeah, and that makes me feel uncomfortable." International students noted several concerns or fears they had about staying in Canada; the number one fear was not getting a job or losing one's job. These concerns seemed to pivot around how they would be perceived by employers. "Maybe they [employers] think that the people are not used to the environment and they prefer the students here first and then they prefer the international students, because they know that they are more settled here than us [*sic*]." Students also considered fluctuations in the economies of both home and host cultures in making their career decisions. For example, one student noted how she was pacing her academic program with the hopes of improved job prospects.

I'm really worried about finding a job because I don't see the jobs anywhere right now. I mean, like I was supposed to graduate in May because I'm doing research here, but I slow down my research and I decide to graduate in September instead of May because of the market situation.

International students expressed fears about cultural barriers for their successful integration in general and for their specific integration into the workplace. Although all international students in this study noted the positive support they experienced from their family to pursue employment and permanent immigration, they also anticipated missing family members in their home countries.

For the most part, international students had not prepared for employment or permanent immigration to Canada at the time of the interview (i.e., 2.5 months prior to expected graduation date). Those who had prepared had generally negative experiences, stating that they had encountered cultural barriers and found the application and networking processes ambiguous and difficult. The job search process varies between countries, and students found that their lack of contacts was a major barrier. As noted in the example found in Table 1, international students greatly appreciated information and contacts provided to them by academic faculty or supervisors. Several international students discussed their sense of discomfort about expectations and if they were perceived by employers as being suitable candidates. As illustrated in the examples found in Table 1, this seemed to be related to their fears of not being culturally appropriate during job interviews, or being seen by employers as less desirable than Canadian students.

International students wished that campus services would offer programs and workshops specified for international students. Such workshops may explain and help with obtaining a work permit, permanent residency, or immigrant status. As well, international students desired information that was specific to graduate students (i.e., job market niches and how to network with potential employers). Although the international students in this study had not gone for career counselling, they noted the importance of career counselling and student services that provided practical information (i.e., workshops on building their resumes and curriculum vitae and completing applications for employment and work permits). Participants felt strongly that such services should be tailored to the needs of international students.

Critical incidents

The CI reported by participants mirrored their answers provided in the interviews. The CI revealed four key themes in these international students' career development and intentions to remain in Canada post-graduation: enhanced quality of life, career-related opportunities, enhanced work environment, and safety and political stability.

Enhanced quality of life

This included participants' views of a cleaner environment, slower pace of life, more freedom than in their home country, that other immigrants like it here, and that the people were friendly. One participant noted the impressions of Canada gained from her interactions with other immigrants.

During my volunteer work a lot of immigrants (because I worked with a lot of immigrants and they've already been here for a few years) – I think the most thing I hear from them is that they really love this country. Because they said that here, the environment is very good and the social welfare is very good and people here are very friendly.

Other participants noted how systems within the country facilitated their transition.

In Canada, everything has a system, like when I had to apply for my work permit, it was just like, I just had to get a letter and it was so easy. If I had to do the same thing in India, it would have taken me two months. Also when you go online to the government of Canada website, like everything is so systemized.

It seems like the quality of systems and services were compared between home and host countries, with many international students noting how their life in Canada was made appreciably easier. Another international student offered a personal example of her experience with the medical system.

The services we receive here, for example, this is just an example. Like my daughter was born in [a Calgary hospital] and I was, kind of, very happy with the service in the hospital. How the people cared about you, about the patient.

These examples illustrate that the career-decision making of these international students was connected to larger lifestyle considerations and perceptions about how their overall quality of life would be enhanced through pursuing permanent immigration.

Career-related opportunities

International students noted that their university degrees were highly valued, that there is a better financial situation in Canada, and others (from their home countries) had obtained jobs. International students examined opportunities in their particular fields of academic study and considered opportunities post-graduation. "So compared to my own country, Canada has more experiences in this realm [social work]. So I think if I graduate and I work here for a few years, I will get more

experiences.” Other international students focused on the financial incentives connected to career-related opportunities in Canada. One student offered the following example of realizing how pursuing a career in Canada would impact his standard of living:

So when I went back – I went to my country over the Christmas – I spent a lot of money though I don’t earn a lot of money here. But I could spend a lot of money, because – there is lots of difference between these two currencies. It was really big and also, like I was feeling myself as a rich man. Yeah, it’s kind of a different feeling. It’s – I feel guilty to feel bad, but it’s nice.

Another participant noted how career opportunities available in Canada helped to fulfill family responsibilities in both his home country and in Canada.

Life security is good and I’m talking about in comparison to my country, because the transportation is much, much better in Canada than in my country and also, the life security. And I have some responsibilities back in my home country. And I’m also married, so it means that I have two families now. Like I have to support my own family, I mean my wife. And also, I have some, a little bit of responsibility back at home. So as the Canadian currency is much higher than my home currency, so if I do a job here, it will be easier for me to do both responsibilities quite comfortably.

These quotes illustrate how the participants connected career related incentives to a higher standard of living and earning capacity within their chosen career fields.

Enhanced work environment

This theme included being paid for working over-time, the existence of employee protection laws, and was also derived from stories of negative experiences back home. The depiction of an enhanced work environment is exemplified in the following quote:

I feel most of people, after they immigrate and work here, it’s worth your effort because it pays better than [in] China. Sometimes if you work in China, you work so hard, and then I even can’t support myself. But in Canada, I feel like as long as you go – to some labour work or some professional work at least you can support yourself and then you can keep yourself a good standard [of] life.

International students commented about the working conditions and expectations of employees. One stated, “I like the fact that here you have certain employment laws.” Other international students commented about the hours of work.

Actually, one thing I found here, we can become more relaxed. So it’s a bit slower the lifestyle here is more relaxed and you can – you do have tons – outside of campus, outside of work you spend time with friends or family. Well, in China, I find it’s very fast. Like everyone is so serious with what they are doing and also, they seem to have not that much time – I really like the idea that after work is the time after work. You don’t necessarily work extra

and here I work a lot, but if you work after your regular work, you get paid double. Working in China, some companies expect you to just work extra for nothing. And that gives you extra pressure.

As international students learned more about Canadian workplace cultures, they were able to compare expectations for performance and working conditions with their home country, and incorporate that information into career decision-making.

Safety and political stability

International students spoke of the safe environment and differences in the governments between their home countries and Canada. One summarized the factors that influenced his decision-making, as follows: “Due to the situation in my country, I can say there are three main things. Corruption, insecurity, and also the economy there is not as good. That is the first issue that we considered to try to stay here.” Another noted safety in light of interpersonal interactions and the environment.

I find the people [here] are much more helpful. And the environment is very safe. I feel safe if I go for a walk or if I’m just going around here. I feel more comfortable just being by myself, because I live here [by] myself.

Several international students noted the social protection of laws in Canada, in comparison to their home countries: “I know the safety this country provides. Yeah, the safety is very good. The kind of law and regulation this country has as compared to India. Yeah, this is kind of more safe for a family.” Again, the decision to pursue permanent immigration is made within the context of environmental and political conditions and the personal and relationship impacts. It is noteworthy that several international students considered the political stability and general level of safety in their decisions to pursue employment and permanent immigration. It should not be forgotten that some international students come from countries where daily life is concerned with war, and/or political and social strife that pose serious threats to personal safety and security. One participant emphasized what was echoed by other international students in the decision to pursue employment and permanent immigration: “Life is peaceful here in Canada.”

These critical incidents provide examples of key influences on the decision-making processes and career planning decisions of international students. As students considered their career options, they were constantly comparing career opportunities, workplace conditions, and lifestyle factors between their home country and perceptions of a future life in Canada. The implications of these data will be discussed in terms of international students’ career development to inform university counselling personnel and program administrators.

Discussion

The welcoming of international students to Canadian universities fosters a symbiotic relationship between the students, institutions, and Canadian government—all of

whom have specific objectives in this relationship. International students are viewed as a highly attractive group, whose diverse skills and foreign knowledge will enhance the Canadian economy. These ambitious students will help diffuse knowledge across cultures while contributing to the country's pool of skilled workers (Pedersen, 1991; Ziguras & Law, 2006).

This study aimed to uncover the experiences of international students in the final stage of their educational programs in terms of their career development. Typically, research on the experiences of international students has emphasized the initial phase of cross-cultural adjustment (Arthur, 2003b, 2008; Leung, 2007). Yet, in welcoming international students, it is exceedingly important that universities provide them with the resources and support to flourish in their new environment. Support must extend beyond an initial orientation to the university culture to the final goal, held by some students, of permanent migration.

The prospect of finding and securing employment (enhanced by factors such as employment laws) was the primary impetus for remaining in Canada post-graduation. This is not surprising, as recent research indicated that international students' primary concerns are job search and placement (Shen & Herr, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). The international students in this study paired the prospect of working in Canada with the appeal of the comparatively high standard of living here, which included relative stability and safety. This important matching can be used by counsellors in exploring international students' decisions in terms of reconciling fundamental differences between home and host cultures and where the students see themselves in the future. Familial considerations and planning for future goals may be discussed to augment the career and lifestyle factors indicated to have high importance among international students.

A key barrier identified in the decision-making and job search processes pertained to cultural differences between international students' home cultures and the Canadian environment. Insufficient proficiency in English was the most concerning cultural barrier. This finding mirrors the current literature, as language competency is rated as the single most important factor for international student adjustment (Arthur, 2004). Further, language capacity, including both second-language ability and confidence about using that ability, has also been implicated as a barrier in the career choices made by international students. Because of this, some students may pursue occupations that do not require high levels of English proficiency (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). Thus, counsellors, when appropriate, may explore international students' options of increasing their language proficiency and practical strategies for reducing anxiety about conversing in a second language. Perhaps counsellors can provide international students with information about campus and community groups with whom they can connect to better familiarize themselves with this culture and to enhance their comfort in speaking English or French, as Canada is a bilingual nation. Students may also benefit from connecting with other international students who have remained in Canada post-graduation to learn about the strategies these students used to improve their English or French and to learn about the essential components and subtleties of Canadian culture (Arthur, 2003a).

Students also expressed the need for campus services to provide information specific to both international and graduate students. Students were interested in practical information to assist them in navigating the logistics of applying for a work permit or how to network with Canadian employers. International students who are considering pursuing employment or immigration to Canada will require additional support in building their new identities as Canadians. Cultural learning can have profound impacts on international students' sense of identity, which has implications for their academic and vocational plans (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). Given the permanency of the decision to remain in Canada, the loss of familiar ways of behaving, routines, customs, and relationships may be considered long-term (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). As such, students nearing the end of their education may benefit from career counselling to help them to explore their new identities and new educational or vocational options. Counsellors can help international students explore ways of incorporating international experience into future career planning (Arthur, 2003a, 2007).

This study provided examples of key factors that influence international students' decisions to pursue employment or immigration in Canada post-graduation. The information derived from this exploratory study is useful to inform support services for students on campus. We were struck by the lack of knowledge held by these students about methods of job searching, and few of them were able to articulate a plan to enter the local labour market. Additionally, their experiences suggested that they faced barriers in their experiences with prospective employers and felt ill-equipped to overcome them. The results suggested that the international students in this study were keen to pursue longer term career options for living in Canada; however, they may lack the requisite resources to achieve these goals. Furthermore, the need for specific campus programming directed at helping international students make the transition from school to employment and permanent immigration emerged in the data. These results may also be of interest to provincial and federal governments who are examining ways to not only recruit international students to Canadian institutions but also to retain them in the broader workforce.

Limitations and future directions

Further research is needed to investigate the ways that international students bridge the gap between their career desires to pursue employment and permanent immigration and their actual experiences of entering the local labour market. Although this study offers insights into factors that influence career decision-making, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged. The participant pool consisted largely of graduate students, most of whom were in their late 20s and studying engineering or science. Despite the range of home countries represented by students in this study, their academic majors were more narrowly represented. Consequently, the codes and themes generated may not necessarily speak to the diversity of the international student population in other academic areas. As undergraduate students were not well represented in this study, it would be worth examining the career intentions of undergraduate students and students in a younger demographic range. Undergraduate students, particularly those coming straight from

high school, are in an earlier phase of their career development and may be affected by different or unexamined influences than students pursuing graduate studies. Additionally, this study was based in one country and in one university setting. Comparative research in a variety of countries and educational settings would add to our knowledge base about the career development issues facing international students as they attempt to move between countries.

Despite limitations, the results of this study indicated that further investigation is warranted to inform practices, policy, and the allocation of resources directed towards international students. As previously mentioned, there is a need to examine the linkage between changing Canadian immigration policy and institutional programs and services directed at international students. Career counsellors who are well-informed about current immigration policies would also benefit from adequately understanding the perspective of Canadian employers on hiring new graduates with a Canadian education and international credentials. Comparing employers' agendas and concerns with international students' specific career ambitions would assist career counsellors and program directors in helping to adequately prepare international students for the workforce.

Conclusion

The literature on international students has focused primarily on the initial adjustment process, with little attention paid to their career development. With increasing mobility between countries and shifting immigration policies, it should not be assumed that international students will return to their home countries. However, as immigration policies change in ways that encourage international students to move from their home countries to study and seek employment, there needs to be corresponding support services to help students navigate those transitions. The voices of international students are an essential aspect of shaping the kinds of services that will meet their needs and help them with integration into the countries where they pursue employment and permanent immigration.

Appendix

Interview questions:

1. What has prompted you to consider staying in Canada after graduation?
2. What influenced your decision to consider staying in Canada after graduation?
3. Who influenced your decision to consider staying in Canada after graduation?
4. What career goals can you meet (or more easily meet) in Canada that you cannot meet in your home country?
5. What have you done to plan for employment in Canada/immigration to Canada?
6. Describe any barriers that you have experienced in the process of deciding to stay in Canada.

7. Describe what has been helpful in making the decision to stay in Canada.
8. What has been your experience with seeking employment in Canada?
9. What support do you think that campus services could offer to help other international students with the decision to pursue employment and immigration to Canada?
10. Describe any concerns or fears you have about deciding to stay in Canada.
11. How will you know this was a good decision for yourself and/or for your family?
12. What or who, would you say, had the greatest influence on your decision to stay in Canada?

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