Journal of International Migration and Integration (2019) 20:995–1011
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-018-00641-0

Drive-By Education: The Role of Vocational Courses in the Migration Projects of Foreign Nurses in Canada

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Published online: 2 January 2019
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Abstract

The connection between international education and immigration has drawn the attention of scholars interested in exploring how immigrants strategically use international education as a means to facilitate their migration projects, including their successful integration in their chosen countries of migration. My article contributes to this literature by focusing on the experiences of foreign nurses who enter Canada as international students enrolled in vocational nursing programs, subsequently transition to temporary work permits, and from there to permanent residence. I analyze the classed implications of this mode of entry, contrasting it with another popular form of temporary entrance: temporary foreign work programs. Vocational nursing education, as undertaken by these nurses, is the gateway through which they enter Canada, and the courses offering such education are deemed "worth" costly tuition fees only insofar as they provide a sound stepping stone to the next phase of migration. In this scenario, the connection between international education and immigration has become articulated to such a degree that vocational nursing education, having lost its original significance, is reframed as convenient "drive-by" for immigration, something to be gotten over in a quick and cursory manner, albeit offering significant benefits in terms of residence rights not available to temporary workers in other immigration categories. At the same time, the influx of foreign nurses is revitalizing vocational programs and contributing to the development of the region.

Keywords International education · International students · Temporary work permits · Immigration · Foreign nurses

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Introduction

Influential social theorists have discussed at length the heavily normative and ideological dimensions of education. Pierre Bourdieu (1986), often credited with popularizing the term social capital, has conceptualized education as form of social capital through which class identity is established and upheld. Louis Althusser (1971) theorized the lively interest of states in education as form of reproducing state ideology and political norms, to the benefit of the ruling class. Contemporary scholars, drawing on such understandings of education, examine the connection between international education and immigration, in particular focusing on how immigrants strategically use international education as a means to facilitate their migration projects, including their successful integration in their chosen countries of migration, while reproducing their middle-class status in their chosen countries of destination (Fong 2011; Baas 2012). The Canadian government, which has an active immigration program in place, is also interested in the potential of international students as prospective migrants, and international education as a means of revitalizing regional development in Canada and addressing workforce shortages in the Canadian labor market (Belkhodja 2009; Walton-Roberts 2011). My research addresses the gap in the literature identified by Covell et al. (2015) that "[l]ittle is known, however, about the study–migration pathway of international students in health profession programs" (p. 4). Their findings indicate that nurses who enter Canada as international students are the largest group of healthcare professionals who remain in Canada. I focus on the experiences of foreign nurses who enter Canada as international students enrolled in vocational nursing programs in Ontario, subsequently transition to temporary work permits, and then apply for permanent residence. Vocational nursing education, as undertaken by these nurses, is thus a means through which they can enter Canada, and from the perspective of nurses interviewed for this study, the courses offering such education are deemed "worth" costly tuition fees because they provide a sound stepping stone to the next phase of migration.

In this scenario, the connection between international education and immigration has become articulated to such a degree that the original significance of nursing vocational education, which was for Canadian nurses to upgrade their skills, has faded. Vocational education has become reframed as convenient "drive-by" for immigration. The dictionary definition of "drive-by," as something to be done in a quick and cursory manner,[1] describes the nurses' experience of vocational education. They view vocational education as primarily a means to gain entrance to Canada, with the actual educational value attached to it a secondary concern. Colleges have re-structured their vocational courses as recruitment tools in a large global healthcare labor market. After discussing the methodology and the scholarly context of this research, I will accordingly present my analysis of ethnographic data gathered from interviews with foreign nurses and relevant officials, contextualized within the policy framework regulating the entrance of international students and the transitions of their legal residential status in Canada. I analyze the classed implications of this mode of entry, contrasting it with another popular form of temporary entrance: temporary foreign work programs. Building upon this comparative analysis, I develop a critique of "methodological categorism," in which the reification of state-imposed administrative divisions of migration obfuscates and distracts attention from the rise of precarious migration and non-citizenship, and its attendant vulnerabilities.

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[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/drive-by

Methodology

This article presents part of the results of an ethnographic study undertaken for my doctoral dissertation in Social Anthropology (2012–2017), drawing on fieldwork conducted with foreign nurses and relevant officials through 2015–2016 and policy analysis from the same period. My PhD project was initially proposed as a qualitative research into the migration challenges faced by temporary foreign workers employed in healthcare in the province of Nova Scotia. However, as often happens, once I embarked on fieldwork and started talking to people to recruit and conduct interviews with temporary foreign healthcare workers, I had to re-adjust my focus. I learned that healthcare workers, and specifically nurses on temporary foreign work permits, have not all entered Canada as temporary foreign workers, via the various iterations of the controversial Temporary Foreign Work Programs (TFWP). Over half the participants of my study had entered as International Students at vocational colleges located in Ontario (and in one case, Alberta), and then transited to temporary work permits as soon as their course(s) were over, usually in less than a year. Once on a temporary work permit, their pathways to permanent residence was the same as that pursued by temporary foreign workers, namely, through various streams of the Provincial Nominee or Federal streams for which they qualified at the time of application. Interviewing foreign nurses who had utilized different modes of entry to Canada but similar modes of applying for permanent residence gave my research a comparative aspect, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the various actors and agents involved in shaping migratory pathways of foreign nurses, and a better appreciation of the class differences and assumptions underlying the different migration streams. It also allowed the development of a more holistic understanding of these precarious and temporary forms of migration, transcending the state-imposed administrative divisions between them.

In sum, out of the 29 interviews I conducted with foreign nurses for the total project, 15 entered Canada as international students. This article is based on the experiences of this group, recounted through narrative, open-ended, ethnographic-style interviews. In tandem with the nurse interviews, I met with officials from relevant agencies involved with foreign nurses. These included a recruitment official from one of the largest vocational colleges in Ontario, officers from professional nursing licensing bodies, nursing and immigration policy analysts at the provincial level in Nova Scotia, and local employers of foreign nurses in Halifax. I also took part in three formal events, called "consultations" conducted by the government agency Immigration and Refugee Citizenship Canada (formerly Citizenship Immigration Canada), as an invited guest.

All the nurses who entered as International Students came from India, and, with one exception, all Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) were Filipinos. A few nurses from Nigeria and Ghana also applied through the International Student stream. This accords with national statistics, suggesting that at college level, India was the top country of origin of international students with 7663 students enrolled in Canadian colleges in 2015 (CBIE 2016). Why do Indians apply as International Students and Filipinos as TFWs? Both national groups describe these programs as the ones being available in their country and "what everyone does." The scholarly literature on the history of labor and nursing migration from these countries details the colonial link between nurse mobility from the global South to the North, and outlines the historical institutions set up to produce and reproduce these labor circuits (Aguilar 1999; McElhinny et al. 2012; Choy 2010; Reddy 2015; Walton-Roberts 2012). It is clear that different sorts of institutional infrastructures have evolved in each country in a context of specific colonial histories which led to particular migration streams being made available in each country.

In India, the nursing profession took root in the Christian, well-educated province of Kerala, with a firm link established between the Nightingale ideology of nursing education via various British-funded institutions, and the export of well-trained nurses into the global nursing workforce (Walton-Roberts et al. 2017). In the Philippines, although Americans have established nursing schools through which cohorts of professional nurses traveled to America (Choy 2010), in general we see the development of a different sort of care ideology, predicated on service and subservience. It has been argued that this stems from traditional and culturally sanctioned practices whereby young girls from poorer family branches were sent to care for the children of wealthier relatives (Barber and Bryan 2012), combined with deliberate national policy-making in the 1960s onward to expand labor migration, in the process constructing Filipinos as the "ideal" worker, friendly, hard-working and compliant (Rodriguez 2008). These processes coincided with the global rise in the demand for female caregivers, who may or may not have formal nursing training, but who were still able to enter global labor migratory pathways through a variety of caregiving programs, often with promise of citizenship. "Donatello," a nurse from the Philippines who entered Canada as an International Student, agrees that he is quite an anomaly since "everyone knows" Filipinos usually move under the Temporary Foreign Work programs (TFWP). He explains that he deliberately chose the International Student stream because it was "much easier—much less red-tape" than the TFWP. He only needed an admission from the college and the language requirements to apply for a Canadian visa, and as "luck" would have it, a Canadian college was running a recruitment fair in the hospital where he was working in the Philippines. TFWP, on the other hand, needs an employer and "all sorts of documents about work."

In addition to the ethnographic interviews described above, I document and describe the policies involved in shaping the migratory pathways of nurses/students/migrant, providing further contextual background to the narratives, and allowing for a better understanding of the decisions and choices made by the nurses.

On "Methodological Categorism"

The comparative analysis of the different sorts of temporary migratory pathways to permanent residence extends the critique against methodological nationalism, advanced by Schiller et al. (1992). Methodological nationalism is understood as the "ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states" (p. 41). This indirectly feeds into nationalistic ideologies which assign primary value to our nationalist identity, pitting migrants and non-migrants against each other, and maintains "ethnic communities" commensurate with a nation-state as the primary unit of analysis in migration research. Much as national categories can be critiqued as a unit of analysis, so can immigration categories.

The fluidity and overlap of migration categories has been studied extensively under the rubrics of “non-citizenship” and “precarity” (Goldring and Landolt, 2013). These scholars argue that the categories of non-citizenship, comprising nebulous arrangements of both legal and illegal statuses such as permanent residence, temporary work permits, study permits, and refugee statuses, have been studied as conceptually independent, with scant attention to the “coherence and connections among these diverse forms of non-citizenship” (p. 5). In effect, studies of precarious migrants and non-citizens have reproduced the sharp and rigid bureaucratic distinctions, and remained bound by them. “Categories of legal status and their boundaries are assumed to be given and fixed” (p. 11). Goldring and Landolt call for a research agenda which clarifies the complexities and the “institutional connections” between the various forms of precarious migration and non-citizenship. Such research must analyze the production, negotiation, and contestations of these diverse forms, considering the long-term effects of their precarity on different social actors and institutions (p. 6).

Pauline Gardiner Barber’s research on Filipina caregivers explicitly critiques administrative categories for reproducing social inequalities (Barber 2008). In the sending country, class positioning shapes the migration motivation of potential migrants, who range from middle to lower classes, while in the country of destination, Canadian immigration policy presented as various “streams” covers a broad range of skill sets and subsequent class positions, leaving migrants vulnerable to deskilling and downward class mobility as they “willingly” tweak their qualifications and skills in order to “get into” streams which are most conducive to migration. Many migrants are “flexible” and able to adapt to the various manifestations of migration policy; however, Barber draws attention to the fact that deep social inequalities disadvantage those “without the social, economic or indeed cultural capital necessary to be nimble regarding the flexibilization in immigration policy” (p. 1282). She raises concern regarding the fact that migration policy is class-based and exacerbates existing social inequalities through reproducing them across borders. Those (potential) migrants who lack the necessary capital—economic, social, and cultural—to migrate through a migration stream such as the Provincial Nominee Program which offers benefits and rights, for example permanent residency, may be shunted into a more disadvantageous (for the migrant) migration stream which offers only temporary residence, and that conditional upon employment status. Where Barber contrasts the rights of temporary versus permanent migrants, linking them with their classed positions in the receiving country, my research analyzes the differential rights accorded to different categories of temporary residents. Temporary foreign workers who enter via TFWPs receive closed, employer-dependent work permits: a practice which has raised concerns of both labor scholars and activists regarding labor protection and the potential for abuse. However, in my study, all the nurses who entered through the TFWP had their travel and processing expenses paid by their employers, down to air tickets and in some cases a month of accommodation. On the other hand, temporary residents who entered as international students shoulder a hefty bill for their processing and tuition fees. Without a solid socioeconomic base to undertake these fees, international study would not be feasible. Upon graduation, they receive the far more desirable open work permit, which is not conditional upon a particular employer and allows them to work and change employers at will—something that they take full advantage of when considering their application for permanent residence which would usually require some form of employer support (depending on the skill level of the applicant).

I apply the thinking of the scholars discussed above to develop the concept of "methodological categorism." Migration in public and policy discourse not only often takes national borders as the primary containment unit and defining feature of migrants, they also have a tendency to reify the strict categorization assigned to migrants through formal immigration streams. I note that the manner of entry into a country does not only immediately impact the types of rights and protections afforded to the migrant from a policy perspective, it will also affect the representation of the migrant within policy, scholarly, and media discourse. Thus, a "Filipina caregiver entering under the Temporary Foreign Worker programme," an "Indian nurse entering through the Federal Skilled Worker programme," and a "Ghanaian nurse entering as International Student" all evoke distinct representations not just regarding their nationality but their socioeconomic backgrounds and class identities, positions, and movements. All these people could end up potentially in similar workplaces, following similar pathways to residential and professional status. This article focuses on how foreign nurses utilize vocational education as a means of entry, in the process giving new life to vocational educational programs and regional college infrastructure in Canada. The comparison with temporary foreign workers draws attention to class-based differences between the programs, even though nurses from both streams end up in similar workplaces, and utilize similar sorts of programs, namely the Provincial Nominee Program, to gain permanent residence. As such, my study contributes to the growing critique of research reified by administrative state-imposed categories, and emphasizes instead the fluidity and overlap among them, highlighting the vulnerabilities and potential for exploitation which is embedded in these types of temporary, precarious, and conditional migrations.

International Education and Migration: Policies and Practice

"Saam," a registered nurse (RN) from India, recounts his experience of traveling to Canada and settling here:

> [I came to Canada in] January 2012 on a student visa. I was studying in Toronto. I was taking a personal care program in [a vocational college in] Ontario. We were not allowed to work for the first six months. But I didn't respect that rule. Because I was not stealing, I was working! … I worked in a pizza store for $6 an hour, just some survival jobs…

And then:

> Exactly after one year I completed the personal care program, but I want to be a RN. I looked for a care job, for me, it was absolutely essential to do that job, because my visa was running out. So what happens you have to have a permanent job then you can extend your visa. But getting an RN may take longer than that. And number two, you have to work for so long so you can become a permanent resident, and that is your other goal.

Here, the juggling of personal, residential, and professional aspirations began. He was no longer an international student with a study visa, but a temporary worker on an open temporary work permit. He took on a lower-skilled job as a Personal Support Worker, which has a National Occupation Classification[2] (NOC) C, in order to keep his work permit valid. In pursuit of his goal of becoming a permanent resident, he knew he had to clock up so many hours of full-time work. But he also wanted to work toward obtaining his "goal two"—becoming a Registered Nurse (RN) (skill level NOC A), which he had been in India.

From this point onwards, Saam's vocational education plays no part in his detailed narrative of his residential and professional challenges. The nursing college was vital insofar as it provided him a means of entry into Canada, and of validating his stay for a year while he focused on his other goals. The educational, social, and cultural experience of college had no further impact on his subsequent struggles for professional recognition, workplace challenges, and permanent resident status. The point is worth emphasizing because the literature on the intersection of immigration and international education, as I shall turn to below, highlights the educational and sociocultural value of the international student experience, while acknowledging its "usefulness" for immigration purposes. In the narratives of Saam and his peers, this delicate balance is skewed: the vocation education is valued primarily for its usefulness to their migration projects, with its educational and sociocultural value a mostly secondary concern.

The number of international students, that is students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of origin, has experienced an average growth of almost 6% annually over 20 years from 1990 to 2011 (OECD 2013). The movement of the nurses interviewed for this project as international students into Canada can be seen as part of a broader global phenomenon of increasing academic student mobility. Seeking education outside of one's homeland was once regarded as a luxury choice of the elite or the exceptionally academically minded. However, as demonstrated by my research participants, middle-class people are now taking advantage of the opportunities to travel outside their countries of origin in order to study (International Consultants for Education and Fairs 2015).

The rise of academic student mobility in tandem with globalization has been analyzed at length by Gürüz (2011), who notes that the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand host 50% of international students worldwide. He further argues that these states have aligned their foreign educational policies based on four "drivers": the promotion of a certain set of cultural values and political norms, to generate income and revenue for universities which are cast as entrepreneurial, corporation-like entities rather than publicly funded institutions, to set up international study as a pathway to skilled migration, and finally international education as a means to form strategic alliances (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2004; Gürüz 2011, p. 318).

The ideological power of education and its ability to disseminate certain cultural and political values has long been recognized by states (Althusser 1971). As Guruz claims: "[H]igher education has always played a key role in the development of national cultural identity and nation-building" (2011, p. 175). The internationalization of education takes this to the global level. International education is acknowledged as a means of generating revenue for universities (OECD 2004). The relationship of the state and academia has changed over the past decades as the view of higher education as a public good, to be funded by the public funds, has changed (Martens et al. 2007; Gürüz 2011). With the rise of market forces and the withdrawal of public funding for universities in many countries, universities have recreated themselves in a more "entrepreneurial" (Gürüz 2011) or "neoliberal" model (Castree and Sparke 2000; Berg et al. 2016). The effect of such "neoliberal" or "entrepreneurial" policies on international student mobility has been palpable. Insofar as they relate to international students, these policies seem mostly to revolve around the promotion of aggressive recruitment practices where universities actively compete against each other for the attraction of international students, together with the imposition of significantly higher tuition fees for international students compared to domestic students. Such tactics have succeeded in significantly increasing the revenues generated by international higher education in the destination countries (OECD 2013). The nurses interviewed for this project who entered as international students describe spending between 7000 and 12,000 Canadian dollars in tuition fees in Ontario vocational colleges. The bridging courses to gain professional licensing are separate and also demand hefty fees.

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[2] "The NOC is a system used by the Government of Canada to classify jobs (occupations). Jobs are grouped based on the type of work a person does and the types of job duties" (Government of Canada 2017).

The "skilled migration approach" to international students is a third, interconnected driver of internationalization of education, which is directly related to the group of interest to this project. Foreign students graduating from the universities of their host countries are considered to be suitable candidates for skilled migration, as their sojourn at university will have already provided them with the human capital and capacity to integrate not just in the labor market but society at large (OECD 2004; Gürüz 2011; Chira 2013).

Finally, the strategic alliances approach is considered the fourth driver of international education, contributing to the increase in the numbers of international students. In the case of international education for nursing students, there has been a flourishing of educational agencies which form partnerships with nursing colleges in destination countries, acting as de facto immigration agencies for nursing students wishing to pursue a global career (Yeates 2008).

The Canadian government is actively involved in strategic policy-making to increase the numbers of international students in Canada as international students are viewed as potential skilled permanent migrants, rather than simply temporary residents who generate quick injections of cash for Canadian universities (Arthur and Flynn 2013; Lu and Hou 2015; Government of Canada 2015). The general trend of current scholarly and policy thinking in Canada views international students as potential contributors to the skilled workforce, rather than temporary learners. My research suggests that in tandem with the reframing of international students as capable citizen-workers, universities and colleges are also recast as migration recruitment agencies, and their value—in the eyes of both students and governments—is linked to their capacity to provide relatively "easy" migration pathways to those who are motivated and have the financial resources to use them as such.

Indeed, the view that international education is a pathway to permanent migration is one held by many students, as 51% of international students in Canada plan to apply for permanent residence in 2015 (CBIE 2016). However, the data suggests that this plan does not become a reality for many. Lu and Hou study the rates of transition to permanent status for international students, and conclude that:

Over the 10 years after they received their first student permit, 27% of the early 1990s cohort became permanent residents, while this was the case for 20% and 25% of individuals in the late 1990s and early 2000s cohorts, respectively. (2015, para. 13).

How does this transition happen, policy-wise? At the time of writing, December 2016, international students may apply for a Post-Graduate Work Permit upon graduation, the duration of which would be equal to the length of their full-time study in Canada. So, in the case of vocational nursing students who typically complete 8-month-long college courses, they would be eligible to receive an 8- or 9-month-long work permit. This work permit will typically be open, that is, unlike the closed work permit issued under the Temporary Foreign Work program, it does not specify the employer or job type. Once they have their temporary work permit and are engaged in full-time employment, they may be eligible to apply for permanent residence through at least three different categories, depending on their skill level, province of employment, and hours worked. These are the Canadian Experience Class, the Federal Skilled Worker Program, and the Provincial Nominee Programs. All these programs have been utilized by the participants of this research who entered as international students and subsequently transited to work permits. As of January 2015, the first two of these programs are now run through the newly updated Express Entry system, an online portal with an overhauled points ranking.

Since the process for obtaining permanent residence can often take longer than the valid period of the work permits held by applicants, they may apply for “bridging work permits” while waiting for the result of the permanent residence application. The application should take place 4 months before the expiry of the current work permit and requires proof that the applicant has applied for permanent residence under one of the classes mentioned above, as well as the payment of various processing fees.

From this point onward, the process followed by international students transiting to permanent residence is the same as that of temporary foreign workers. Basically, with the advice of an immigration lawyer, their employer, or through their own research, they need to determine in which of the permanent immigration streams they are most able to meet the requirements, looking at factors such as the NOC level of the job they are working in at the time of application, the number of hours they have worked, whether the job they are holding requires an Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) or not, and if so, whether their employer is prepared to provide them with one. This is the essence of the “two-step” migration, where applicants apply for permanent residence after a period of temporary stay in Canada, and the advantages and disadvantages of this remain controversial. At the time of fieldwork (April 2015 to December 2016), there were several immigration streams which offered the opportunity to transition from temporary to permanent status.

Although transition from temporary to permanent is also possible through federal programs such as the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) and the Canadian Experience Class (CEC), more popular than these streams are the Provincial Nominee Programs. Many of the international graduates of my study stated that the reason they chose to come to Nova Scotia was the promise of the PNP on a lower-skilled occupation (NOC C) as a pathway to permanent residence. This means that even “low-skilled” temporary foreign workers who were traditionally not able to transition to permanent status (with the exception of Live-in Caregivers, a now defunct category) were able to apply for permanent residency with the support of their employee. In general, the PNPs provide a mean for provinces to nominate their own candidates for permanent migration to the federal government, who in all cases makes the final decision on immigration applications. Caps for the PNPs are negotiated between the provinces and the federal government.

Despite these challenges, and the rapid changes in the criteria of the programs—which are under constant "adjustment" to provincial labor markets—they remain a popular route to transition. Nakache and Dixon-Perera (2015) report that PNPs are second-largest source of economic immigration to Canada, with 37% of all transitions of temporary to permanent status in 2012 taking place through a PNP (p. 6).

Should temporary foreign workers or international students wish to transition to permanent resident status, they must do so using the same immigration categories, as demonstrated by this research. However, they are subject to very different policy discourses. The international student is cast as the desirable potential immigrant. States engage in international rivalry to attract these student bodies, due to their valuable future participation to the "global knowledge economy," with the skills and knowledge they presumably gained at host country universities. In Canada, their numbers are set to increase significantly, and their pathway to permanent residence is facilitated by the Express Entry reforms mentioned above. The temporary foreign worker, on the other hand, is treated more suspiciously. Employers are subject to strict control and monitoring regarding their hiring practices of temporary foreign workers, something they resent very much. Although the numbers of temporary foreign workers have increased dramatically in the past, this has been brought under control by the federal government through significant fee increases and other measures discussed above, and the numbers look set to decline. Some Nova Scotian employers are turning to recruitment from vocational colleges in Ontario rather than temporary foreign workers simply because the costs of hiring international students are so much lower. In doing so, the "cost" of migration is offloaded from the employer and on to the international student/future worker.

There is some scholarly debate around the integration of international students in Canadian communities, critiquing whether in fact the transition to permanent status can be done in the somewhat starry-eyed policy terms described above (Houshmand et al. 2014; Chira 2013; Zhang and Beck 2014). They focus on the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students, and detail challenges such as racial discrimination and "micro aggressions" as well as inadequate services and infrastructure to attend to the needs of international students. Students traveling to Canada to take up shorter vocational courses at colleges such as the nurses interviewed for this study are generally overlooked in the academic literature, reflective of the fact that in 2014, approximately only 7% of international students in Canada are studying at college level (CBIE 2016). This percentage is projected to increase globally (ICEF 2015), and certainly some vocational colleges have positioned themselves to benefit from the international education market to a much greater degree than before, as will be discussed in greater depth below.

The Evolution of Vocational Nursing Programs as Migration Gateways

These programs, although understudied in the literature on international students, have become an important gateway for the entrance of foreign nurses into Canada on international student visas. The information below is gathered from an in-depth interview with the recruitment officer of one of the larger Ontario colleges.

This college is based in a famous wine and tourist region and is accordingly well known for its hospitality/hotelier/tourism/culinary programs. However, around 2009, it decided to branch out into another market and find the “next big thing.” This was in tandem with the provincial government of Ontario declaring an aim of doubling international students. The college strategically decided to increase the number of international students by 5% (currently at about 25% of the student population). In 2010, the College began its partnership with INSCOL, an agency based in India, with offices around the world. INSCOL helps develop “global nurses”—that is, support and facilitate the movement and employment of internationally educated nurses around the globe. They have experience with placing foreign-trained nurses in expat clinics serving in India, where foreign (first world) training has a premium, and where the patients are first world “medical tourists,” who travel for surgery which could be more expensive in their home countries. INSCOL helped the College realize the big market for global nurses. Thus, the College gained foothold in countries traditionally known for training and sending nurses overseas: the Philippines, Nigeria, and India. As described by the recruitment officer:

> We could have never imagined nursing as big as hospitality. It is a business—a strong business model, and offsets declining funding from the provincial government. We don’t want to be just known as a hospitality school, but build a brand that is more diverse—what is it that nobody else is doing?

Although the College has had nursing graduate programs since the 1980s, these were small part-time programs aimed at the domestic market, that is, Canadian nurses planning to gain some additional nursing skills. As described by their recruitment officer, Nursing College never foresaw that these minor courses would evolve to become the unique, in-demand educational products that they are now. These programs were revitalized throughout 2009–2010 in partnership with INSCOL and tailored to international students seeking to move to educational opportunities in the field of nursing in Canada. At that time, the only courses available for to international nurses who wanted to further their education were traditional Master’s degrees. However, the vocational courses offered by Nursing College are different from traditional university degrees. According to the recruitment officer of this college, these are vocational and practical, hands-on courses focused on providing international students with the skills they need for the Canadian healthcare market. Traditional university programs, with their high entrance requirements and lengthy durations, are not suitable for these students who are looking for quick footholds in the Canadian labor markets. Foreign nurses are looking for something practical which can get them in the Canadian job market, which is precisely what Nursing College offers them: applied skills. The courses also prepare them to write the Registered Practical Nurse exams, which many choose to write before the more challenging Registered Nurse examination.

The healthcare market is massive, and growing, in a large part focused in long-term care homes. One of the main innovations of Nursing College was to partner with long-term care facilities in the region, rather than hospitals for the clinical placements, thus breaking the barrier on numbers of placement imposed by hospitals. Palliative care, community mental health, critical care health, and gerontology courses were added in 2015. At present, they host around 700–800 international nursing students. The next market to "crack" is China, where they have already reached out to various nursing schools and associations.

> How do some of these nurses end up in Halifax? They are keen to establish themselves in Canada, and have no attachment to any particular place. They will go where the work is. If one gets a job in Halifax, and talks to the employers who is looking for some more, then that will end up with five more nurses relocating to Halifax. They often don't care where they go—they are here for one purpose: to launch their career in Canada, and if they can do it in a remote town, they are happier—cost of living cheaper.

"It's Worth It!": The Value of Vocational Education in the Migration Project

"Tanu" trained as an RN at one of the best nursing schools in India, a school so good and recognizable that she was granted eligibility to write the RN examination without being assigned any bridging courses, which is apparently quite rare. She currently works as a Personal Support Worker (PSW) in one of the residential facilities in Halifax. She described her workdays as "relaxing":

> There is a lack of responsibility here, you know, for the PSWs. The RNs are responsible for everything. Not that there is much happening. When I was working in a hospital in India [as an RN] there was so much responsibility. I have no responsibilities here. It's refreshing, you know?

After arriving in Canada as an international student, Tanu took almost 3 years of postgraduate vocational nursing courses at various colleges in Ontario before applying and receiving an open work permit valid for 3 years. She told me she must have spent around $18,000 on tuition fees. "And it's worth it, because I received a long work permit. Valid for three years!" Tanu considers the courses she took as a way of receiving a longer work permit than usual to lengthen her stay in Canada while she figures out her next steps. These fees can be considered as a way of "buying" a measure of security and stability in a context of uncertainty and mobility.

> "Joseph" describes the advantages and disadvantages of applying as an international student clearly:
> Shiva: So now my question is: there are these different categories to apply for immigration to Canada, e.g., FSWP, TFW. Why did you choose this category (of international student)?
> Joseph: That was only stream through which I could come to Canada very easily, in a short space of time. I apply for my student visa—I get the visa in about 15 days. If you had admission, it was very easy. I studied at Lampton College.
> Shiva: And how did you hear about the college?
> Joseph: From an immigration consultant in India.

> Shiva: And were there challenges, or problems of coming to Canada on a study visa?
> Joseph: The money to pay the consultant, and then the college. And then, even though I am a RN, I had to take a course called PSW that is just an entry-level course—just a care job. But if I applied as an RN (through the skilled work category), there would be a long wait, even if they accept RNs from India.
> Shiva: And your family financed you?
> Joseph: No, we took loans from different banks. But the consultant agency was very good—based in India, and they have branches across the world.
> Shiva: And at that point, even though you were coming on a student visa, the plan was stay? You knew you were going to stay?
> Joseph: Yes, exactly.

Joseph refers to the notorious "de-skilling"—a challenge faced by many immigrants and in particular those in licensed professions, in which their skills and education from their countries of origin are not recognized in the Canadian labor market, and thus they turn to jobs at a lower skill and status than what they are actually trained for. De-skilling has been discussed extensively, and it is associated with lower returns to education and work experience for ethnic minority immigrants (Yoshida and Smith 2008; Li 2000; Reitz 2007; Boyd and Yiu 2009). This literature presents the consensus that racialization in the workplace, that is, discriminatory practices which excludes immigrants and visible minority workers from advancement and upwards career mobility may be considered a large contributing factor to this downward trend. In Joseph's account, taking "basic" vocational courses is part and parcel of the whole de-skilling experience, but again, he is willing to undergo that simply because of the entry and residential advantages that being an international student confers. Unlike Tanu and Joseph, "Meran" experienced a fair amount of stress during her vocational education, partially due to the fact that she already had a young family from whom she was separated at that point. Her high anxiety point came when she was evaluating her decisions and prospects prior to registering for a second semester at a vocational college, while also preparing for the equivalent of the LPN examination in Ontario. The financial drain and the uncertainty of the future were a potent combination:

> My husband had to support me, but he couldn't work [full-time] because of our two daughters. And I couldn't work. We were draining out of money. There was stress, you know. And I had to take a break because we couldn't afford the second semester fee. And I knew if I don't make it now somehow, I will have to go back [to India].… But my husband was so positive, and he would support me, and I had some good friends, one of my good friends gave me a loan for the second semester because she knew I would make it. If I could pass the exam. But I had to take a break and think about it and see how it will work, you know? Because I didn't want to fail. I didn't want to go back, after spending so much money. After passing the exam [for the equivalent of the LPN in Ontario, the RPN], they were asking for more documents again, even after passing the exam.

Meran describes her migration project as an individualized risk-taking enterprise (*did I make the right decision?*), and her attempts at gaining professional knowledge, while investing in vocational education as a way of prolonging her stay while she "figures out her next steps," are also in line with the experiences of the other Indian nurses interviewed. However, for Meran, the stakes were even higher, since unlike Saam who told me had "nothing" in India, she had had a promising and rewarding career as a military registered nurse in the Indian Army, which she quit after making the decision to migrate. She had loved her job, and the decision to quit, which is cast as a family decision between her and her husband, supported by positive testimonies from friends who had migrated before them, was an agonizing one for her. In her story, migration becomes a familial and communal enterprise: it is her decision, yes, but it takes place in the context of full support, if not pressure, of her husband and also good friends, to the extent that they sponsor her second term at the college in order to ensure her stay in Canada.

> Amur's words are further testimony to the significant role of the vocational college facilitating in her migration. However, she seems disgruntled with the educational value of what she was taught:
> Shiva: So if you had to give a very approximate figure how much did your college courses cost?
> Amur: oh that took like $7500—it is a lot. Like it's a lot. If you get your PR (permanent residence) [it would have only been] They only have to pay $2500–3000, but for international students it was $7500.
> Shiva: So did the college courses help in passing your [Licensed Practical Nurse] exam?
> Amur: No—[they were] nothing important. It was just personal care assistance. It was helpful to get to know about how the system works.
> Shiva: How about making connections, friends? Was the college useful for that?
> Amur: Yeah—and that is good, but it is nothing to do with [becoming a] Licensed Practical Nurse or Registered Nurse. It's so different. Like we can say [the courses were] around basic things. It's only in the basic things.
> Nina's attitude to the vocational courses was different—she was enthusiastic, choosing courses carefully and taking pride in the knowledge she gained, rather than summarily dismissing them as means to residency:
> I worked in India for more than 12 years. I have my Masters degree in nursing. To improve my skills I chose a course called Emergency Nursing for International Nurses. That course is only meant for international nurses. I chose that course and did that for one year, graduated with honours. After I was looking to improve my knowledge by taking courses like leadership and English. I chose Niagara College and I did general arts and science program. I did a few courses—I enjoyed it. And I graduated.
> Nevertheless, she was disappointed and frustrated when it came to professional credential recognition to realize that the vocational courses have no effect at all in her licensing application, and she was still required to take bridging courses assigned by the professional nursing college. "Why? I spent $12,000 on the vocational courses, yes I enjoyed them, but why are they not accepted by the professional college? Again I have to spend money, waste time taking bridging courses. Who is to answer for the $12,000 I spent?"

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how governments as well as nurses and their families strategize international education and its cultural, ideological, and political-economic significance to further migration projects at individual, regional, and national levels. The case of foreign nurses on temporary work permits entering Canada via vocational courses constitutes an extreme example of such strategizing. In the narratives unpacked here, the educational cachet of international study pales in comparison to its significance as a tool to enable the entrance of prospective migrants and to prolong their stay, and to enhance Canadian regional development and educational infrastructure from the point of view of the college administrator, who has become as a de facto migration agent. Although individual nurses display varied and nuanced attitudes to the expensive vocational courses they take, the general consensus is that they are useful primarily as a migration tool, first to enter Canada, and to prolong their stay while they pursue their significant migration goals regarding credential recognition, employment, and residence. Furthermore, the lack of alignment of vocational education, and the bridging courses required by the professional licensing bodies, came across as a source of frustration, resentment, and waste of time and money.

By comparing international students to those who enter via temporary foreign work programs, this article contributes to the growing critique of "methodological categorism," that is, reproducing bureaucratic and state-imposed categories of migration as rigid and reified features of migration in academic discourse. Both these migrant groups enter Canada on precarious statuses, and both depend on a set of complex, shifting array of federal and provincial policies to realize their long-term migration goals and ambitions. However, the juxtaposition of temporary foreign work with international study is a useful illustration of how class divisions and socioeconomic inequalities are reproduced minutely via closely engineered migration categories. Via the closed/open work permit system, the state awards privileges to those who are willing to spend significant amount of money in the form of international tuition fees. These students are cast as ideal immigrants and consumers, soon-to-be citizens. Temporary foreign workers, although in many cases end up working side by side with international students and utilize similar pathways to permanent migration, are subject to controversial closed permits, rendering them exposed to potentially vulnerable labor situations. Meanwhile, responding to state pressure to reduce the use of temporary foreign workers by increasing fees and restrictions on this program, some employers have turned increasingly toward hiring international students who have transited to open work permits in healthcare. In this scenario, the "cost" of migration is directly offloaded from the employer to the migrant, as employment is gained by those who were able to make the initial investment in international vocational education.

In terms of education, I would recommend bringing vocational courses more in line with what nurses expect and require for credential recognition, acknowledging their skills and knowledge as Registered Nurses often with many years of experience in their countries of origin. This may work to offset the deskilling which afflicts immigrants and in particular those in professionalized jobs in their chosen countries of migration. In terms of migration, I would recommend acknowledging the reality that international students and temporary foreign workers are here with the intention to stay, and are utilizing similar pathways, if not entrance points, in order to do so. I finish by adding my voice to the scholars and activists who argue that temporary work permits, whether open or closed, and two-step migration more broadly, leave prospective migrants in financially and emotionally vulnerable positions, and call for less arduous and fairer policies governing the migration of those who are here in Canada providing vital services to our population.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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