University to Work Transition: Experiences of Undergraduate International Students in Canada

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Introduction

- The number of international students in Canada reached 1,040,985 in 2023, a 29% increase from 2022, and a 63% growth over the past five years (ICEF Monitor 2024; CBIE 2023).
- India, China, Philippines, and Nigeria were the top source countries for international students from 2019-2023 (ICEF Monitor 2024).
- 80% of international students stay in their province of study one year after graduation, and 70% remain after five years (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Objectives

- To examine the process international students undergo as they move from student into employee.
- To document the academic, economic, familial, social, and cultural barriers and facilitators shaping the university to work transition.

Methods
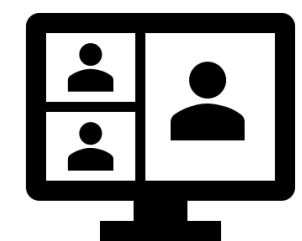
- Online interviews in 2023 to 2024
- Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA.
- Transcripts were coded using grounded theory.

Participants

17 undergraduate students were selected and interviewed based on their reported immigrant status as student visa holders on arrival in Canada.

Participants came from various countries: China, Ghana, India, Malawi, Nigeria, Panama, Philippines, St. Maarten, Zambia and Iran.

Results

Stage 1: Prior to Finish Degree

Building professional social networks and searching for mentorship programs

"But for my program, specifically, I would say more internship-based courses, like introducing a co-op and practical training" (Sophia, Indian, age 22, arrived in 2021).

Cultural integration and adjustment

"For me personally, I don't think it's (university) as helpful because I don't know if it's because it's a cultural thing. I know Canada is a very individualistic country. There's this notion that you're supposed to figure out everything by yourself" (Samantha, Malawian, age 21, arrived in 2022).
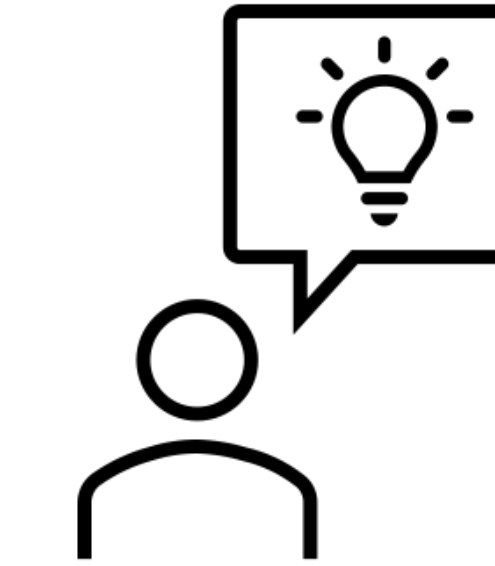
Stage 2: Looking for a Job

Lack of Canadian work experience

"Find a job, I will say still difficult. I learned something about Canada that they like experience. But at the same time, some people is just a first timer and everything" (Chelsea, Nigerian, age 22, arrived in 2018).

Lack of institutional support

"I think it is a problem, right? And there's minimal support from the university in job searching" (Melissa, Nigerian, age 22, arrived in 2019).

Discriminatory hiring practices

"For starters, I just like to say if they could not be racist, that's the main thing is like, the your name holds a lot of significance" (Samantha, Malawian, age 21, arrived in 2022).

Stage 3: Finding and working in a Job

Lack of employment opportunities in their field of study

"I mentioned, it's hard to find job in my field, and especially now when the recession is going on" (Charles, India, aged 20-24, arrived in 2021).

Students may be trapped in poor working conditions to obtain permanent residence requirements

"Every job is exploitive. The manager is really horrible. Anyone that's working in these conditions are working because they're trying to get a PR" (Sandra, St. Maarten, age 20-24, arrived in 2018).

Difficulty finding work because of their temporary status

"It's been super hard because they prioritize Canadian citizens and permanent residents" (Nerissa, Iran, aged 20-24).

Recommendation

Future research should also examine how post-graduation employment differs by occupational sector.

We need to identify and implement changes in international student immigration policies, employer practices, and community support systems in order to prevent deskilling in the workplace.

Conclusion

- Temporary migrant status results in impermanent and liminal status within the immigration hierarchy.
- IS experience physical, psychological, economic and social distress.
- IS receive limited and inadequate academic support from the university.
- IS experience discrimination and exclusion in the universities and in the larger society.
- IS experience employment challenges (e.g., limited hours, poor working conditions).
- IS report feeling discriminated during the job hiring process.