

It's Not as Easy as They Say: International Students' Perspectives About Gaining Canadian Work Experience

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Abstract

This study provides insights into international students' perspectives of preparing for entry into employment in the Canadian workforce. From a human capital perspective, international students are valuable resources for the Canadian labour market and for other countries with skilled labour shortages. However, most research on international students has focused on their initial transition experience, and available research on their employment experiences is often limited to the post-graduation transition. International students need to build their capacity for employment concurrently while they are studying, gaining local work experience. In this article we present an analysis of critical incidents collected from international students which highlights five key barriers in their experience of the Canadian work context, including policies and procedures, competition and economic conditions, challenges for navigating local cultural norms, language abilities, and their personal life circumstances. The discussion draws connections between international student recruitment and their longer-term goals for residency in Canada, with recommendations for bridging policies and services.

Keywords: international students; employability; Enhanced Critical Incident Technique; career development

In 2016, the former Canadian federal immigration minister John McCallum stated, "International students are the best source of immigrants, in the sense that they're educated, they're young, they speak English or French, they know something of the country. So we should be doing everything we can do to court them" (Donovan, 2016). This press statement signified the expanded policy shift to recruiting international students, referred to as international-born, non-Canadians, who have lived and studied in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012), for their potential as future workers and permanent residents. During the past decade, the federal government has connected international student recruitment, employment, immigration, and international trade, most recently exemplified in the report, *Building on Success: International Education Strategy, 2019-2024* (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Between 2010 and 2020, the number of international students in Canada increased by 125%, with 530,540 reported in 2020 (Canadian Bureau of International Education [CBIE], 2021),

positioning Canada as third in the world for market share following the United States and Australia. Canada continued to build market share during the Covid-19 pandemic, receiving 621,600 international students in 2021 (Crossman et al., 2022). At the onset of the pandemic, countries such as Australia shut their borders to new international students. Canada continued to welcome international students and strengthened its international reputation as a desirable destination country (ICEF Monitor, 2021).

Although international students generally perceive Canada to be a welcoming country (CBIE, 2021), the pathway from education to employment and permanent residency is not as easy as it might seem. International students need to gain local education and employment experience as mechanisms for building additional local credentials, and increasing their eligibility for pursuing permanent residency status (Woodend & Arthur, 2018). Indeed, the results of prior research suggest that international students face multiple barriers upon graduation when seeking to enter the local workforce such as employer attitudes, lack of local work experience, cultural differences in approaches to job search, and restrictions in visa processes

for employment and immigration rights (Dam et al., 2018; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). To the earlier point, what appears to be seamless entry into the Canadian workforce is, in reality, a complex process, complicated by changing immigration policies and conditions in the labour market (Crossman et al., 2022). Although many international students make a positive transition to employment (Frenette et al., 2019), the notion of courting them as immigrants to Canada needs to be deconstructed, incorporating international students' views about what they identify to be challenging, and how they overcome those challenges.

In the current study, our overarching objective was to investigate the university to work transition of international students in Canada, while they were in their student roles. This direction expands on prior research that has examined international students' employment experiences as a post-graduation phenomenon, when students finish their education, and make the transition to the labour market (Germain & Vulture, 2016; Netierman et al., 2021; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Rather than conceptualizing the transition from higher education to employment as sequential in nature, we aimed to cast a lens on international students' experiences as they started to engage with the Canadian labour market while concurrently in their student roles. We were particularly interested in the challenges that international students faced, when pursuing

employment while they studied, and how they navigated those challenges in light of their future goals of securing employment and permanent residency in Canada.

Is Building Human Capital Enough to Overcome Employment Barriers?

To contextualize the current study, this section frames the career development of international students according to their human capital potential. Drawing on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993; Tan, 2014), international education is an investment made by individuals and by governments to increase both the qualifications of the future workforce and productivity in the organizations that hire international students. From this perspective, there are proposed 'win-win' advantages for international students to increase their employment prospects and for organizations to access valuable sources of human capital to maintain a well-qualified and productive workforce (Arthur, 2013). It is important to investigate the ways that international students build human capital while in their student roles, including how they navigate initial attempts to gain local work experience. In general, employability refers to gaining skills, knowledge, and experiences that increase qualifications for future employment (Nguyen & Hartz (2020). However, these capabilities are not cultivated at only one point in the transition experiences of international students; they require cumulative and progressive

skill building experiences related to longer-term career goals (Woodend & Arthur, 2018).

Increasing the Human Capital of International Students

Many countries with developed economies and declining birth rates, such as Canada, rely upon skilled immigrant workers to expand their labour force and subsequently grow their economy (Dumont & Liebig, 2014). International students have been deemed 'preferable immigrants' because they have been identified as a valuable source of human capital to fill shortages in the skilled labour markets of destination countries (Berquist et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2021; Ziguras & Law, 2006). What makes international students a desirable source of skilled labour is a combination of their familiarity with the destination country, education credentials, and knowledge and contacts from their home countries (Crossman et al., 2021; Hawthorne, 2014). Even though their international experience is presumably an asset for the diversification of the local labour pool, gaining local workforce knowledge and experience are pivotal factors for enhancing their longer-term employment prospects (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). Aligned with positioning international students as an important source of skilled labour, governments have created immigration policies to incentivize international students to study and then work post-graduation. For example, in comparison to other countries (Berquist et al.,

2019), Canada has a positive reputation for post-graduate work permits. This enables many international students to work in Canada for up to three years post-graduation, depending on the degree and priority sectors, to secure valuable experience that supports their permanent residency application. The onset of COVID-19 disrupted the plans of many international students, although some accommodations were given, to extend work permits that had been delayed or had expired (Government of Canada, 2021).

Just as there are many motives for the destination country to pursue international students, there are also many motives for international students to pursue international education. One of the main reasons is to gain valuable credentials for pursuing future educational or employment opportunities (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Berquist et al., 2019; Nilsson & Ripmesster, 2016). From a human capital perspective, international education is an investment both for individuals in terms of increasing their employability, as well as economic growth through adding skilled workers to the labour market. Accordingly, as international students gain additional knowledge and skills, they should obtain improved employment outcomes. Although this seems like a relatively straightforward ratio of investment and returns, there are many complex and intersecting influences on international students' pursuit of employment and longer-term plans for pursuing immigration in destination countries (Netierman

et al., 2021). For example, the employability of international students' is not determined only by efforts to acquire new skills; there are other mitigating influences such as labour market conditions, access to work experience, and the attitudes of local people, including employers' hiring practices (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020).

Berquist et al. (2019) reported on results from surveys conducted with international students in OECD countries, noting between 60-80% of participants indicated their intention to work in the destination country post-graduation. Survey research from Canada showed similar results: 68% of international students, who study in Canada, intend to pursue permanent residency, and 65% would like to stay in Canada post-graduation to obtain work experience (Esses et al., 2018). However, it is important to clarify that such intentions are not always predetermined for international students when they arrive, and may shift over time. As international students gain more experience in the destination country, integrate into their academic programs, and establish local support; they may discover or deepen their commitment to pursuing employment, and permanent immigration (Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Conversely, disruptions to original plans to stay in destination may occur due to changing employment conditions and the perceived benefits from comparing opportunities between country contexts. Two additional Canadian studies illustrate the importance of considering the

decision-making of international students as an evolving process, in which plans for employment are contingent on a variety of factors that shift over time (Germain & Vultur, 2016; Netierman et al., 2021). The experiences of international students in destination countries, while they are students, has a strong bearing on how they envision future employment pathways, in either the destination or home countries, or across both contexts.

The Current Study

From the available literature, it is clear that developing human capital is important to the objectives of international students and to employers who are seeking human resources to fill gaps in a highly skilled workforce. It is also clear that international students, although they have desirable human capital, face barriers to employment that impede these shared objectives, such as language ability, employer bias, and changing visa regulations (Dam et al., 2018; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Given this disconnection, the university-to-work transition is a critical developmental period where key supports are essential for ensuring the employment success of international students. The focus of previous research has been on supporting the initial adjustment of international students to the destination country and their academic success once in a program, with fewer studies examining their readiness for employment (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). What research does exist has focused on the bar-

riers students face, specifically in the post-study period (Dam et al., 2018; Coffey et al., 2018; Woodend & Arthur, 2018), and key challenges and limitations to service provision (e.g., alumni unable to access career services; ineligibility for some federal benefits, such as employment insurance). A long-term and ongoing consideration for international students' career development is their acquisition of human capital potential, including during their academic studies, in order to inform appropriate career support. As such, the current study focused on addressing the following research question: What do international students find challenging as they attempt to engage with employment in the Canadian work context, while in their student roles?

Method

We begin the discussion of the method with statements regarding the authors' positionality in relation to their identities and experience relevant to the topic of the research study. Next, the discussion turns to the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT; Butterfield et al., 2009; McDaniel et al., 2019) as the approach that informed data collection and analysis. The recruitment context and demographic information of the research participants are also detailed.

Researchers' Positionality

The first author identifies as an able-bodied, cis-gendered

White woman who has worked as a counsellor in higher education settings and as an academic in a counselling psychology program. Her research program has focused on the learning and employment transitions of newcomers, including international students in higher education, their accompanying partners, and younger international students in secondary schools. The first author has been a homestay parent to international students and has personally experienced living and working in another country.

The second researcher identifies himself as a cis-gendered, queer, able-bodied White man who has a doctoral degree and is an assistant professor in a counselling psychology program. The second author has professional experience, both in research and practice, with international career transitions including working with immigrants, and international students and their accompanying partners. Although the second author has personal experience and a family background of immigrating for career purposes, he does not have experience studying internationally.

The third author identifies as an able-bodied, cis-gendered White woman who has a master's degree in counselling psychology. She does not have lived experience working or studying internationally, with her main experience of transitions related to moving from rural to urban areas. The third author has worked extensively with international students as a counsellor in a post-secondary counselling centre, and as a researcher for this

project and her master's degree thesis.

The fourth author identifies as a cis-gendered White woman who has a master's degree in counselling psychology and experience providing direct counselling with international students in higher education. In addition to research on this project, the fourth author was involved in a research project on the design of mentorship programs for international students.

The fifth author identifies as a cis-gendered second-generation Chinese Canadian woman, whose parents arrived in Canada in the 1970s as refugees. She has a Master's degree in counselling psychology and currently provides counselling services at a community agency. Her family background has informed her understanding of acculturation and cross-cultural experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis Using the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique

ECIT (Butterfield et al., 2009) was used to construct the study (e.g., interview protocols), and to analyze and interpret the data. ECIT is based on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flannigan, 1954), which helps to determine the critical tasks in a given profession that are needed for success. CIT research has been used in many disciplines (e.g., nursing, counselling), with a focus on providing first-hand accounts of a particular experience and what helps or hinders it. According to

Viergever (2019), CIT is a methodology that provides guidance to researchers throughout the research process including alignment of research goals and how to describe or explain the data. Viergever also noted that researchers are able to use CIT as a method that specifies ways to collect and analyze the data such as interviews and coding. CIT, and by extension ECIT, are based on the theoretical framework of pragmatism, where the purpose is to highlight solutions to problems, rather than to provide descriptions of them (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

Although CIT originated in research based in a positivist worldview and could include both quantitative and qualitative data, recent applications of ECIT have included research from a post-modern worldview, used with qualitative research studies (McDaniel et al., 2019). This post-modern, constructivist perspective is the one we adopted for this study. Specifically, we used ECIT to focus on critical incidents (CI) described by participants as either helpful, unhelpful, or wished-for events (Butterfield et al., 2009).

Design and Procedure

To understand international students' perceptions of preparing for the Canadian work context, the researchers recruited 18 international students in-study from a Western Canadian university. At the time of conducting the study, the university was located in a region of Canada that was experi-

encing an economic downturn and higher rates of unemployment. The researchers sent recruitment materials to university services (e.g., career services), who distributed them to international students. The researchers also invited participants to share the recruitment materials with other international students who may be interested. Data collection included one-on-one in-person or telephone, one hour-long interviews. A professional transcriber, who signed an oath or confidentiality, transcribed the interviews, verbatim. All participants were international students in an academic year prior to their final year of study and there were no exclusion criteria based on age, gender, country of origin, or field of study.

Overall, there were eight women and 10 men, with an average age of 27 ($SD = 5.2$; $min = 20$, $max = 36$). Five of the participants were studying at the undergraduate level, eight in master's programs, and five in doctoral programs. Twelve of the participants identified as being in engineering-related fields, three in health sciences-related fields, two in finance-fields, and one in urban studies. Participants' self-identified ethnicities included six Latin-American, five Chinese, five South Asian, and one each of Iranian and Somalian. The research interviews were conducted in English, as all participants had met the language requirements for university admission. Participants reported having spent an average of 2.08 years in Canada ($SD = 1.62$; $min = 0.17$; $max = 5.00$).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was an abridged version of ECIT. Specifically, instead of an initial and then follow up interview with the participants, the data analysis for this study uses the initial (i.e., only one) interview. Moreover, instead of grouping data into batches, the research team systematically reviewed each interview to extract CIs. The research team worked in pairs with the first researcher acting as lead coder, with the second researcher acting as a critical second reader. Any discrepancies or disagreements about the codes were noted; the researchers then met to reach complete agreement. Next, the transcript was sent to an independent review team (i.e., an independent judge and a content expert) not involved in the initial coding, to determine the soundness of the analysis. The review team noted any discrepancies or disagreement, and then returned the transcript to the coding team. Inter-rater agreement was calculated after the codes were finalized, total agreement reached, and an audit trail of incidents flagged for discussion documented. In line with ECIT standards (Butterfield et al., 2009), any incidents that did not have complete agreement between the reviews in the research team were dropped from the analysis. Researchers also kept a record of changes to how incidents were grouped based on discussions and reviews of the analysis.

Individual researchers conducted an initial reading of

the transcript to gain familiarity with the data; then they coded transcripts according to whether incidents were identified as helping, hindering, or wish-list items. Helping incidents (HE) included supports, resources, or personal qualities that aided participants in their career transition or helped them better understand the Canadian work context. Hindering incidents (HI) included experiences, resources, or other events that were unhelpful or blocked participants' career transition or adjustment to the employment culture in Canada. Finally, wish-list items (WL) were identified as resources, supports, or qualities that participants expressed would have aided them had they been available at the time, or would be helpful in the future.

Critical incidents, which included an example of the incident and the importance of the incident, were extracted and compiled into a separate spreadsheet. Researchers examined incidents and sorted CIs into categories based on how incidents aligned. Categories were required to reach a threshold of 25%, as described by Butterfield et al., 2009, to be considered viable and retained for analysis. This 25% minimum viability was used to indicate to the review pairs to reconsider the CIs and either group them with other, viable categories, or to group non-viable CIs together to possibly create a new viable category. Where appropriate, categories were further refined into sub-categories to capture nuances in participants' experiences and better

organize the data.

As part of the data analysis process, the researchers engaged in the credibility checks noted by Butterfield et al. (2009). These credibility checks, highlighted in stylized text below, are important to provide an audit trail of the data analysis process, and the trustworthiness of the interpretations made. Specifically:

1. *All interview were recorded* to keep a record of the exact data that was analysed.
2. Interviewers were trained in the *interview protocol and followed it as closely as possible*, noting any potential noteworthy deviations.
3. The research team engaged in *independent extraction* (i.e., review pairs) of the CIs from the interviews.
4. The research pairs continued to review uncoded data until no new categories emerged (i.e., *exhaustiveness*), and subsequent interview CIs all fit under the initial categories.
5. *Participation rates* for the CIs and categories were calculated and noted (see below table) for transparency.
6. The CIs and categories were reviewed by an *independent judge* to check for it.

7. The CIs and categories were also reviewed by an additional independent, content *expert for their opinion* on the fit of the categories.
8. *Theoretical agreement* included two steps: a) denoting some of the key assumptions that the research team had when engaging in the data analysis (see research positionality statements); and, b) linking the CIs, categories and the write-up of the findings to the career development, international student, and human capital literature (i.e., noting key studies and situating the findings within them).
9. As the researchers used an abridged version ECIT that did not include follow up interviews with participants, the researchers also did not engage in *participant checks* of the CIs and categories, as this was not relevant to the current study. As such, the findings represent the interpretations of the researchers, based on the accounts of the participants.

Lastly, operational definitions for categories and their corresponding participation rates were compiled and categories were sent to the review team for confirmation. The categories are further described in the following section.

Findings

From the interviews, the researchers identified four main categories that captured international students' perceptions of the Canadian work context, including: (1) policies and procedures, (2) economy and competition, (3) culture, (4) language, and (5) life circumstance. The 18 participants described a total of 73 critical incidents, which the researchers derived using the ECIT protocol. Twelve of the incidents (16.4%) were described as helpful, 46 incidents (63%) were described as unhelpful, and 15 (20.5%) incidents were expressed as wish-list items. The critical incidents that met Butterfield and colleague's (2009) recommended minimum participation rate of 25% are demarcated below (see Table 1).

Policies and Procedures

Participants spoke of government, university, or organizational policies and procedures that affected the job search process in Canada. Of the 20 incidents in this category, about half were described as hindering, and the remaining were described as wish-list. Only one incident was endorsed as helping. This was the only category that met criteria to be included as both hindering and wish list CIs.

Regarding difficulties, participants spoke about policies and procedures impacting their attainment of work permits and permanent residencies. These were often described as a long and arduous

process. According to Participant 16, this process impacted their own and others' ability to apply for work:

[In] the beginning, [when] I came here, [with] the study permit [I was] holding I cannot work. Not even part-time...last summer I may have been getting a job with the co-op program, but unfortunately the [work] permit ha[s]n't come to my hands yet...I know some of my friends, they're graduating, and they couldn't get the working permit in time so they missed the job opportunity as well...once you wait, you like miss the perfect time to apply for a job.

The slow processing of work permits interfered with students' job search and caused many to miss employment opportunities. Other students commented that such policies and procedures interfered with their ability to obtain adequate funding while completing their studies, with some policies enforcing a limit to students' work hours, and others restricting the types of internships, job applications, and scholarship opportunities available to international students. This is illustrated in a quote provided by Participant 6:

There's no full-time co-op or internship for graduate students and we could only work 20 hours a week... And I think, that's so un-

fair. Like I can't be [a] TA and I have [a] limited number of applications for internship. And that ma[de] me quite upset this morning...Yeah but after apply[ing], my cousin told me that [Master of Engineering]. student[s] don't have fundings, or they can't apply for the scholarships.

Participants also shared that they were unable to apply for jobs that required candidates to be a Canadian citizen or Permanent Resident, further reducing their pool of job prospects. These restrictions not only have the effect of reducing international students' ability to support themselves, but also decreases the opportunities to obtain relevant work experience, deterring potential international students from coming to Canada. According to Participant 10: "[I have] a lot of friends...who really would like to study here. They are pretty good academic[ally] and professional[ly]...[but] they don't have enough money...". Consequently, the participant noted financial barriers for studying in Canada.

The wish-list items that participants described corresponded with the difficulties experienced by international students. Such items included increased internship opportunities for international students, and additional assistance when applying for permanent residency or work permits. For example, Participant 4 suggested increasing the length of the

Table 1

Numbers of Incidents and Participant Rates per Category and Incident Type

Category	Critical Incident								
	Helping (n = 12)			Hindering (n = 46)			Wish-list (n = 15)		
	IN (n)	PA (n)	PA (%)	IN (n)	PA (n)	PA (%)	IN (n)	PA (n)	PA (%)
Policies & procedures	1	1	5.6	9	8	44	10	6	33.3
Economy & competition	0	0	0	8	6	33.3	0	0	0
Cultural challenges	3	2	11.11	14	10	55.6	3	3	16.7
Language skills	6	6	33.3	8	5	27.8	2	2	11.1
Life Circumstance	2	1	5.6	7	5	27.8	0	0	0

Note. Numbers in boldface type indicate categories with participation rates of 25% or greater. PA = Participants (N = 18); IN = Incidents (N = 73)

post-graduate work permit and providing international students with an easier method to apply for permanent residency, given that they have lived in Canada for several years. Participant 16 requested that students be notified in advance regarding the time required to process permits, allowing students to plan and prepare accordingly. Lastly, Participant 7 explained the benefit of providing these opportunities to international students:

...[W]e as international students come here to Canada, leaving behind our country, our family, I mean, well, the main reason is because we do want to get ahead. But we also, at the end of the day, we are going to work for th[is] country... because we are eager and we are willing to also help other people...I think that as long as the country, in this case Canada, opens more oppor-

tunities for international students—maybe we could help to make the country better.

As noted by Participant 7, international students are often prepared to work hard and motivated to succeed. Investing in such individuals would likely benefit Canadian society, through increasing the pool of skilled labour, particularly as economic conditions improve. Previous research highlights that international students report feeling deterred from working in Canada post-graduation due to confusing and inconsistent government policy (Nunes & Arthur, 2013); moreover, some employers have identified a reluctance in hiring international students due to confusing and unclear work permit policy and permit restrictions (Bond et al., 2007). International students are concerned about their work rights to gain local employment experience, and they would

like increased access to the Canadian labour market.

Economy and Competition

The category of economy and competition reflected the state of the economy, its impact on job prospects, and the increased competition for work. Participants described all critical incidents in this category as hindering in the job application process. Many participants shared that they had heard from other students and their professors about the economic downturn in other provinces, leading to reduced job prospects for not only international students, but also domestic students, as illustrated by Participant 15:

...[T]he economy's not really good right now...because I think it's generally hard for people to get a job. Yeah. Because I know lots of Canadian people, like

local people, they spend lots of time to search a job but they cannot...So well if this happens, then it must be hard for international students as well.

Participant 17 shared similar sentiments, leading to concerns that they would be competing with more Canadian students for employment opportunities, thereby decreasing their chances of securing employment, and increasing pressure to enhance their applications:

I think it's too competitive. So like I know my friends are exaggerating, but they say, like [employers] have thousands of resume[s] and then like employers just pick two or ten of them. So some, it's really possible that people just even don't see your resume...if I competitive with some Canadian student, I will have to give all the employers a reason, like strong reason, why they want me, not others.

The combination of an economic downturn, low job prospects, and competition resulted in changes to international students' attitudes that they may not have experienced back home. Participant 11 illustrated this point when they described differences in the market between their home country and Canada. They also emphasized a lack of job training in Canada, as well as the need to be more

alert and hard-working in order to keep up with changing economic conditions between countries:

Okay the market [back home] is very good right now. So yeah, we weren't very worried about if we'll get a job or not and everything. So over here the market is down right now...So I think most of the [international students] are more alert than they usually are...they weren't expecting that they'll be working so hard, right in the beginning...And what I've seen over here and what I observed back in 2009 also, here, if you want to do something, you have to go ahead and do it. And back home it's like, you are made to do it because...they want everybody to excel. So they are, like continuously training us.

Finally, participants also described feelings of fear and a sense of hopelessness regarding securing employment in Canada. Participant 6 shared: "I talk about job things with my classmates, but their advice is that the situation is quite not that good...And [I] don't think there's any hope to find a job in such a bad situation". Thus, the bleak view of the economy and limited opportunities led to a sentiment not only shared amongst participants, but also amongst their peers and community members. The challenges in finding employ-

ment have significant implications for international students wishing to stay in Canada post-graduation. Choi et al. (2021) found that 60% of international students who became permanent residents after study were employed during or shortly after graduation, suggesting that higher employment is linked to an increase in transition to permanent residency. The economic context can shift dramatically between the time of enrolling in university and graduation. These findings suggest a coordinated effort is required between post-secondary institutions, employers, and community agencies to offer alternative ways of gaining practical experience and entry into the employment market, especially during turbulent economic times.

Cultural Challenges

The category of cultural challenges encapsulates incidences and items that reflected participants' awareness and experience of Canadian culture within educational, workplace, and community settings. This category is comprised of 20 CIs, with 14 hindering, three helping and three wish-list items. The helping and wish-list items did not meet the 25% participation rate.

Among the hindering incidents, participants expressed concerns about being subjected to employers' biases, which may interfere with job prospects. Participant 6 expressed the following concerns with gender discrimination:

And just for girls, there's

glass ceiling in the industry...I guess if I really go to the industry like related to engineering, I will be surrounded by men...maybe they will look down at me. Yeah that's my worries...I mean maybe my employer would underestimate my ability. Yeah. I mean sometimes guys in the office will talk together and if others just [keep saying] girls come do this, girls come do that...[this] may affect my employer, or my colleagues' mind.

Concerns with biases related to a reduction in the quality of participants' work experience, generating fears of unfair treatment from employers. Participants also described worrying about employers' preferences for hiring Canadian students over international students, further decreasing their opportunities for employment. For Participant 14, personal experience with discrimination and racism while being employed at the university had significant consequences for their mental and emotional well-being, and changed their perception of the university:

And that actually put me through a depression... university has the highest level of education in the world...they should ensure security to people, to students, and should be a global place...I'm paying tuition to study in this university. I should not be fac-

ing racism. I paid for this. This is not free to me... so I am very multi-cultural by traits and also by my looks...I didn't expect that at the University level, and which affected my career a lot.

Participants also described cultural differences and misunderstandings as impacting the international student living experience, further exacerbating concerns about the job search. This is illustrated in a quote from Participant 6:

Because we were born in two different cultures... something you take for granted may seem strange to me... And we have different...way[s] of thinking. And that may cause some difference of our behaviour. And maybe that difference of behaviour will affect the attitude of my employers toward me. And maybe that will make me look strange in this environment. And especially if I go to an interview, if they ask me some questions I may think in a totally different way. And that comes out a different answer. And that may seem strange to you, and that may affect my ability, my opportunity to get a job.

International students' unfamiliarity with Canadian culture and mannerisms caused concerns related to their interactions with

employers and ability to network. These concerns were compounded by students' unfamiliarity with the way Canadian institutional systems were structured, causing challenges in navigating educational and workplace settings. Illustrated by participant 13, they described a distinct difference in the way careers were structured in Canada and their home country, creating confusion regarding what to expect after graduation:

So you know, when I am here, I don't know how, how the system is going to work when I graduate. But I think it is going to be very difficult—different—from the place I was working before. Because here you have to specialize in a thing, otherwise—because in, in back in our countries, you know, you get a general degree in a thing and you can just do different stuff. But here you have to specialize, you know, Bachelors, Masters, PhD, and even in that you have to like specialize in a particular thing. Yeah so I think that's very different.

International students' unfamiliarity with Canadian culture also lead to homesickness, which impeded some of the participants' academic progress and led them to reconsider whether they should remain in Canada. The foreignness of Canadian culture can cause anxieties and stresses that affect both the personal lives and

career-related experiences of international students. The quality of their interpersonal interactions is key for helping international students to gain a sense of belonging in the new cultural context and to manage perceived acculturation stressors (Walsworth et al., 2022). The degree to which international students are able to make new contacts and build their cultural and social capital is important for helping them pursue their career goals (Arthur, 2017; Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). Unfortunately, lack of understanding about cultural expectations, and negative experiences related interpersonal interactions, may pose as barriers that deter students from remaining in Canada (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Bond et al., 2007). Research in the UK also found that international students expressed plans to leave the country when they believed that employers were not interested in hiring international students or they expected significant language barriers for employment (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016).

Language Skills

In total there were 16 CIs relating to Language skills, six were helping, eight were hindering, and two were wish-list items. About a third of participants described the incidents in this category to be beneficial, most of which referred to the importance of practicing English through conversations with others or via attendance at workshops. Improved language skills enabled them to participate in their communities,

to socialize with peers, and to network with professionals. Several participants spoke about the importance of practicing English across a variety of contexts to develop responsive and appropriate communication skills in Canada. Good communication skills were essential for navigating both personal and professional domains, as illustrated by Participant 1:

[Y]ou need to go for example to a grocery store to buy things, and you need to communicate with people, you need to ask many things...[I]f you want to find, for example, a place to live...If you want to rent a basement apartment [you need to communicate]. [If] [y]ou want to find something good or have some good advice, you need to explain what do you want, what do you need. And also in the, here at the university, because when you start studying you need to, yeah, communicate with partners, all the professors, the people from the department.

In contrast, participants described a lack of English fluency as impeding their sense of preparedness for work, as it caused feelings of isolation from peers, anxiety in job interviews, and concerns of misunderstandings when communicating with others. Many participants recognized the importance of language ability in attaining jobs or academic po-

sitions, as well as in completing their academic requirements (e.g., writing reports). According to Participant 6:

Last month there [was] a Career Fair at this university...and I asked about... recruiting students at the [company]. And she told me that they prefer students with better communication skills. And I ask[ed] them, do you have any specification, requirements, about their academic background? And she said, that's not that important because they would offer you training...the important thing is that you could communicate well.

Thus, communication was not only perceived to be important by international students, but also by potential employers.

Participant 3 also shared a similar experience when applying for a position with a professor:

I talk with a professor here. And she told me, yes, okay, I like you, your profile, you have some experience. Okay, but when she asked me for my English, at that time I...[hadn't] got the score requirement to the department. And she [had] to hire other students...I missed that opportunity because I couldn't [get] the score...

In this case, the lack of English proficiency outweighed the other positive aspects of the student's application. Other participants described spending time with peers who spoke their native language as being an obstacle to learning English, suggesting that international students may need formal and informal learning opportunities to improve their English language ability given its critical role for securing employment. Research on international students has primarily focused on English language ability for students in their initial transition and ongoing academic experience (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). These findings suggest that language skills are critical while studying, and through to the transition into the workforce as well.

Life Circumstances

This category was comprised of critical incidents about activities and events that affected the life balance of international students. With examples from 26% of participants represented, there were nine CIs in this category with only the seven hindering incidents reaching the threshold participation rate. Critical incidents in this category captured participants' descriptions of life in Canada and the interaction between planning for academia and planning for the workforce simultaneously. Overwhelmingly, international students discussed a multitude of issues they perceived as limiting preparation for their careers.

More than any other factor, participants deemed time to

be a critical barrier in preventing international students from preparing for their careers. Many participants cited a need to excel in their academics, and that a strict focus on schoolwork meant they often sacrificed career focus. The following quote from Participant 2 exemplifies this struggle:

The education itself is getting a little hectic and then you're very short on time...like, all the time, you're just concerned about that. There's very little time to think about what you want to do in the future, or else you lose what's now.

With limited time to commit to anything beyond the immediate demands of their academic requirements, international students reported feeling unable to begin the process of planning for life after school. This forced a focus on the present that made it difficult to engage in any form of employment preparation, leaving international students unsure of and feeling underprepared for the future. Previous research with student services professionals on supporting international students in their transition to work echoes the importance of finding time to complete academic work, while also gaining experiences, such as volunteering, to support a future job application (Woodend, 2018).

Discussion

Countries, such as Canada, who recruit large numbers of international students as part of intersecting education and immigration policies, have a lot to gain from ensuring that students have a positive educational experience, including transitioning into short and long-term employment opportunities (Esses et al., 2018). International students in this study described experiences of seeking employment in the Canadian context as a challenging process. Key barriers identified by participants included the poor prospects of the economy at the time of the study, fears of bias in the workplace, challenges navigating cultural and linguistic differences, and the limitations of work permits and subsequent earning potential. These barriers have significant implications for building the potential human capital of international students and for supporting them in gaining important employability credentials.

In contrast to the unhelpful experiences, participants described helpful and wish list experiences primarily in the context of how language proficiency could aid in their integration and achievement of future job prospects, as well as improved current resources and policies. The following paragraphs will contextualize these findings in the relation to existing literature and make recommendations for key stakeholders, including post-secondary institutions, employers, career practitioners, and government policy makers.

International students in the current study described the challenges of obtaining work permits and permanent resident status through highlighting factors that blocked or interfered with their ability to enter the Canadian workforce. In particular, students identified how current government policy regarding work permits interfered with their job search process and resulted in missed employment opportunities. Efforts to recruit international students to study in Canada requires reform of policies and procedures regarding visa requirements (Dam, 2018). Such barriers spill over to employers as major stakeholders, through reluctance to hire international students due to unclear work permit policy and permit restrictions (Bond et al., 2007).

These results correspond to research conducted in the top two countries that compete with Canada for international students. For example, employers in one study in the United States indicated that the lack of knowledge of work authorization was a primary barrier to hiring international students (Balin et al., 2016). In the Australian context, international students have reported that employers expressed concern about their visa status, lack of local work experience, and reported difficulties securing job interviews as a result (Coffey et al., 2018). The findings of the current study indicate that these employment policies and visa conditions could be further streamlined, and clarified, to ease international students' access to relevant work experience

while studying; in turn, providing greater opportunity for them to remain post-graduation. Specialist advisors in international student services and career services offices are key personnel for providing up-to-date information regarding work permit procedures and addressing misinformation regarding permit requirements and restrictions.

Participants also described the negative impact of fluctuating economic conditions. This proved to be especially challenging when a downturn occurred when students were beginning their journey to secure employment. Previous research has found that positive perceptions about a better quality of life in Canada, combined with unmet expectations of better job prospects and a lack of work experience, contributed to difficulties in the job search process (Nunes & Arthur, 2013).

Improving career prospects is a main motivator for international students choosing to study abroad, with one study indicating 69% of participants identified it as a key factor (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Many international students in the current study identified opportunities for work placement or practical experience as important or very important when selecting a post-secondary institution. A potential solution worth considering includes employers and community agencies, in partnership with the university, creating and promoting volunteer experience. These positions may help international students to gain practical skills and experience nec-

essary for a smooth transition into paid employment. The result of the current study also supported previous findings indicating international students require support to develop their professional networks, a significant contributing factor in successfully finding employment (Bond et al., 2007). Personnel in post-secondary institutions are key resources for connecting international students with personnel from industry (Arthur, 2017).

A positive finding worth highlighting as a best practice identified by international students included practicing English through workshops, and social events to build relationships, professional networks, and boost confidence. Social supports are a considerable influence on international students' transition experiences, with students identifying the significant positive impact of peers and mentors (Arthur, 2017). Moreover, students have indicated that building strong friendships influenced their decision to stay in Canada post-graduation, and that career decision-making did not just take place on an individual level, but a group one, with valued input from social relationships (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). These previous findings, in conjunction with the current study, highlight the importance of social supports for international students' school-to-work transition and presents an opportunity for universities to bring students together, both international and domestic, in a more casual social setting (e.g., campus-based networking, peer-to-peer mentorship programs).

Navigating the local culture was also associated with a number of identified barriers as part of the current study, most notably concerns regarding bias from potential employers, fear of being treated unfairly, unfamiliarity with Canadian culture, and reservations regarding remaining in Canada. Concerns about the perceptions of some employers seem warranted, given the results from previous research that has highlighted employers' reluctance about hiring international students (Bond et al., 2007). However, it is encouraging to note that concerns about work permit authorization may be the key for employers who raised fewer concerns about international students' cultural differences, citing professionalism and career focus as key strengths (Balin et al., 2016).

Overall, participants in the current study described predominantly four times more hindering than helping experiences in regards to seeking employment while in study. This suggests that there are still opportunities for key stakeholders (i.e., employers, post-secondary personnel, faculty members and advisors, career practitioners, international students, and policy-makers) to connect and collaborate, with the common goal of supporting international students to gain valuable work experience and enhance their human capital potential.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provides insights into the journey of international students preparing to enter the labour market and gain work experience while studying. There were two main limitations to this study. First, there were fewer helping CIs than there were hindering and wish list items. This is a limitation in that although participants' responses helped to elucidate problematic areas of their experience with the Canadian workforce, they do not provide as much understanding about solutions to these problems. Additional helping CIs would provide some indication of what international students, universities, governments, and employers can do to help with integration into the workforce. Although wish list items are a helpful starting point for creating future policy and programs to support international students, this study does not evaluate the efficacy of these items to determine if, when enacted, they are indeed helpful experiences.

A second and related limitation pertains to the timing of this study. Global market instability was a major factor for the Canadian economy and the province where the researchers conducted the study. It is possible that this economic insecurity created additional structural barriers to international students' perceptions of the Canadian workplace and thus resulted in a larger number of hindering CIs. Moving forward, future research could investigate

international students' experiences during periods of economic improvement, to gain additional knowledge about what is helpful for entering the workforce.

Additional future directions include research that captures employer, university, and policy-maker perspectives, which would inform key influences and the interplay between various stakeholders. Future research could also build upon the perspectives of international students as they transition from being students into workers, and their longer-term trajectories as employees. This understanding will become more important as universities and governments alike seek to increase recruitment of international students as a valuable resource within higher education and within the Canadian workforce, respectively.

Concluding Comments

Although there are critical barriers to employment, it is important not to adopt a deficits-based perspective regarding international students' abilities (Jones, 2017). Despite barriers, approximately one in four international students are able to stay in the destination country long-term, indicative of their numerous skills and strengths (Berquist et al., 2019). One controversy that surfaces is the extent to which building human capital by emphasizing the preparation of international students can overcome persistent structural and social barriers to employment (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). With few studies

exploring the in-study employment experiences of international students (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), the current study provided critical insights into international students' early attempts to connect with the employment market.

Five key influences on efforts of international students to gain employment were highlighted in the results of this study: 1) the policies and procedures that facilitate or impede international students' search for employment, 2) the economy and competition into which they are transitioning, 3) their ability to navigate and negotiate cultural differences, 4) their actual and perceived English language ability, and, 5) the ways in which they manage their life circumstances. Findings suggest that governments need to engage in continuous improvements for equitable access to work permits so as not to impede international students' motivation to secure employment. In turn, university curriculum and integrated learning experiences could help bridge the gap between international students' theoretical knowledge and practical experience. For employers, the current findings suggest addressing biased practices and creating policies that welcome diversity. Finally, career practitioners require up-to-date information regarding the labour market and immigration/work permit parameters in order to help guide international students and employers through the workforce transition process. Without these understandings, international students may face barriers that impede them

from gaining critical employment experience that is essential for their career development and for pursuing opportunities in the Canadian labour market.

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