



Context and Practices of University Student Services for International Students' Workforce Integration: Research-in-Brief

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Abstract

As universities recruit greater numbers of international students and governments seek to retain them as skilled workers, researchers have started to again investigate their integration experiences. A gap in the literature is the long-term career integration of international students, particularly the contextual influences that affect it. One such influence is that of university student services. This pilot study looked at the perspectives of three university student service personnel in career services, international student services, and alumni and leadership services and the ways in which they are working with international students to support their workplace integration. Specifically, this study highlighted

the tensions university student services personnel face in providing relevant support while adhering to institutional policy, the gaps in their ability to help students, and ideas about future directions in their work with students.

Keywords: international students; student services; post-secondary; workforce integration

Recently, researchers have again turned their attention to international students amid the changing priorities of universities and governments (Arthur, 2017). Specifically, universities are recruiting increasing numbers of international students in order to address internationalization policies (CBIE, 2014), while governments, such as the federal Canadian government, are recognizing the potential of international students as future skilled participants in the labour market (CIC, 2016). In the past, much of the research focused on international students' initial adjustment to the host culture, with little investigation into their long-term career development (Arthur & Flynn, 2013). Furthermore, research

largely focused on the intrinsic or personal agency of international students to improve their situation, with little investigation into contextual influences that impact their adjustment and transition.

As universities are typically the main point of contact and source of support for international students, a critical piece to understanding their successful transition and integration into the workforce is the exploration of student services offered by universities (CBIE, 2014). To address this gap, the goal of this pilot study was to begin investigating the context and practices of university student services in supporting international students to integrate into the Canadian workforce. As such, the overarching research questions were (a) how are university student services working with international students for Canadian workforce integration? And (b) where are the gaps in assisting international students to integrate into the Canadian workforce?

Method

In conceptualizing the study, a qualitative approach,

grounded in social constructionism was used; that is, reality is not objective but subjectively understood based on individuals' social interactions, culture, and language (Gergen, 1985). Specifically, I used the biographical narrative method (Lichtman, 2012). This method allowed the exploration of the first-person perspectives of university student services personnel in assisting international students while also including contextual information that contributed to these perspectives (Frost & Ouellette, 2011).

In terms of research design, I contacted three different student services at a university in Western Canada were contacted and volunteers were asked for from each to speak about their experiences in helping international students prepare for integration into the Canadian workforce. There were three participants, one each from career services, international student services, and alumni and leadership services. An hour-long, in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted which were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the authors. In regards to the participants, all identified as White-Canadian, two were female and one was male, and their ages ranged from 25 to 50 years old. All three had a bachelor's degree, had been in their current position for two years to 10 years, and had a mandate to work specifically with international students.

For analysis, the biographical narrative method is quite flexible (Lichtman, 2012),

and so a thematic analysis was used to determine the research findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, codes were generated from the raw data. Then they were grouped into similar categories, before combining these categories under conceptually relevant themes. Two independent researchers, one faculty member and one graduate students who were both knowledgeable in the method, reviewed the codes, categories, and themes for their appropriateness, relevance, and logic. Finally, they were ordered, moving chronologically from past and present experiences to future plans in order to portray the biographical narrative of the participants in their interactions with helping international students integrate into the Canadian workforce.

Results

There were five key themes. First, there was *vocational development* of the participants, which was related to participants' ideas around their previous experiences that brought them to their current roles. Participants identified that they either had a personal or a professional experience that linked them to working with international students. One participant, pseudonym Rosie, noted:

I was an international student during my undergraduate degree and my international student advisor, at the other institution, they helped me to make sure I had a really great experience. The thought

of being able to do that for students here motivated me to seek this position.

Second, there was the participants' *sense of responsibilities* in working with international students. Specifically, participants noted that the university and department they worked in advocated for the personal agency of the students to seek integration within the campus community and Canadian workplace. At the same time, this mandate conflicted with participants' experience in working with some international students, who often requested a more directive approach, putting the participants in an unknown situation of adhering to policy or helping students in the way they needed. Tim shared:

Another student was working on campus and wanted to change [her job] and we went through the process of revising the cover letter and résumé and I gave her significant feedback. Sometimes I actually have to be really hands on... I don't know if that's good. We're not supposed to be hands on.

A third theme was that, even with this disconnection between policy and students' needs, the participants believed in the *university services effectiveness* in helping international students to succeed. Furthermore, these services were particularly effective when the students were also working to help themselves. Tina explained, "Everything is in place for an international student to succeed and even though there are a number of possibilities for

services, students need to ask questions. When students are already fairly capable then they are easier to help”.

A fourth theme was the *roadblocks* identified by the participants. In particular, participants mentioned that there were critical structural and cultural barriers that impeded their work with students. Rosie shared that “it’s a challenge to make connections with international students because there are so many of them on campus and I by no means have the ability to meet with them all”. Adding to that, Tim explained, “people from some cultures need to learn to sell themselves in the Canadian workforce. It could be connected to language competence but it’s more than that, it’s how they express themselves verbally”.

The final key theme was the *future directions* participants thought were needed to assist international students. Participants were divided with Tina thinking that university student services need to be more directive, noting that “we [university services] need to try harder to educate about Canadian workplace customs and to make it mandatory or they won’t attend”. Conversely, Tim felt that rather than university student services, students needed to do more about their situation, exclaiming “students need to be more proactive and to learn to stop focusing on their research and instead get experience, paid or volunteer”.

Implications and Conclusion

From these key findings, there are some implications that may be transferable to other university services contexts. For practice, university student services personnel in this study identified trying to work appropriately and effectively with international students, while also being mindful of the institutional mandates that were sometimes counter to this work. The participants in this study suggested that it would be helpful if universities consulted with service personnel that work with and support international students in order to create service provision that is culturally sensitive to their needs. Given that this was a pilot study at one university with a smaller sample size, further research could help to understand the context and needs of university services personnel across Canada and if the themes raised in this study are applicable more broadly. Moreover, additional investigation is needed around effective strategies for working with students who do not behave in a way that is considered proactive within a Western context (e.g., actively seeking out support, working independently). Although international students may access services readily, in the context of this pilot study, international students seem to be less well-served by existing services than students who are more acculturated to Canadian workplace norms, possibly because these approaches do not address their needs.

Universities will continue to recruit international students (CBIE, 2014), who often seek a foreign education in order to advance immigration hopes (Arthur & Flynn, 2013). As the primary point of contact for international students, universities have a unique role in supporting students’ integration not just to the campus community but also to the larger Canadian society. Although the participants in this study identified success in assisting international students, there remained a gap in service provision for them in addressing students’ need for more directive assistance. As such, continued investigation into culturally appropriate and effective student services is needed to understand the contexts in which international students successful with this integration.

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