Internationalization & Career-Focused Programming for International Students
A Qualitative Study of Universities in Canada

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Problem & Background

Background: The relationship between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), governments, and students are often symbiotic in nature – students consider further education as a platform for career development, HEIs pursue the diversification of income and increased prestige/rankings, while governments are focused on the retention of skilled labour that will support and sustain national economies. Although policy makers promote the position that international students are ideal or "designer" immigrants with their education, language abilities, and cultural experiences, there are indications that international students face a number of challenges in transitioning from studies to career. Recent surveys show that 60 percent of international student respondents indicated that they plan to apply for permanent residency (PR) in Canada after graduation combined with the increased importance of employability outcomes for international students. Given the importance of employability outcomes for students, this qualitative mixed-methods research examined the career-focused programming provided at Canadian universities.

International Students in Canada
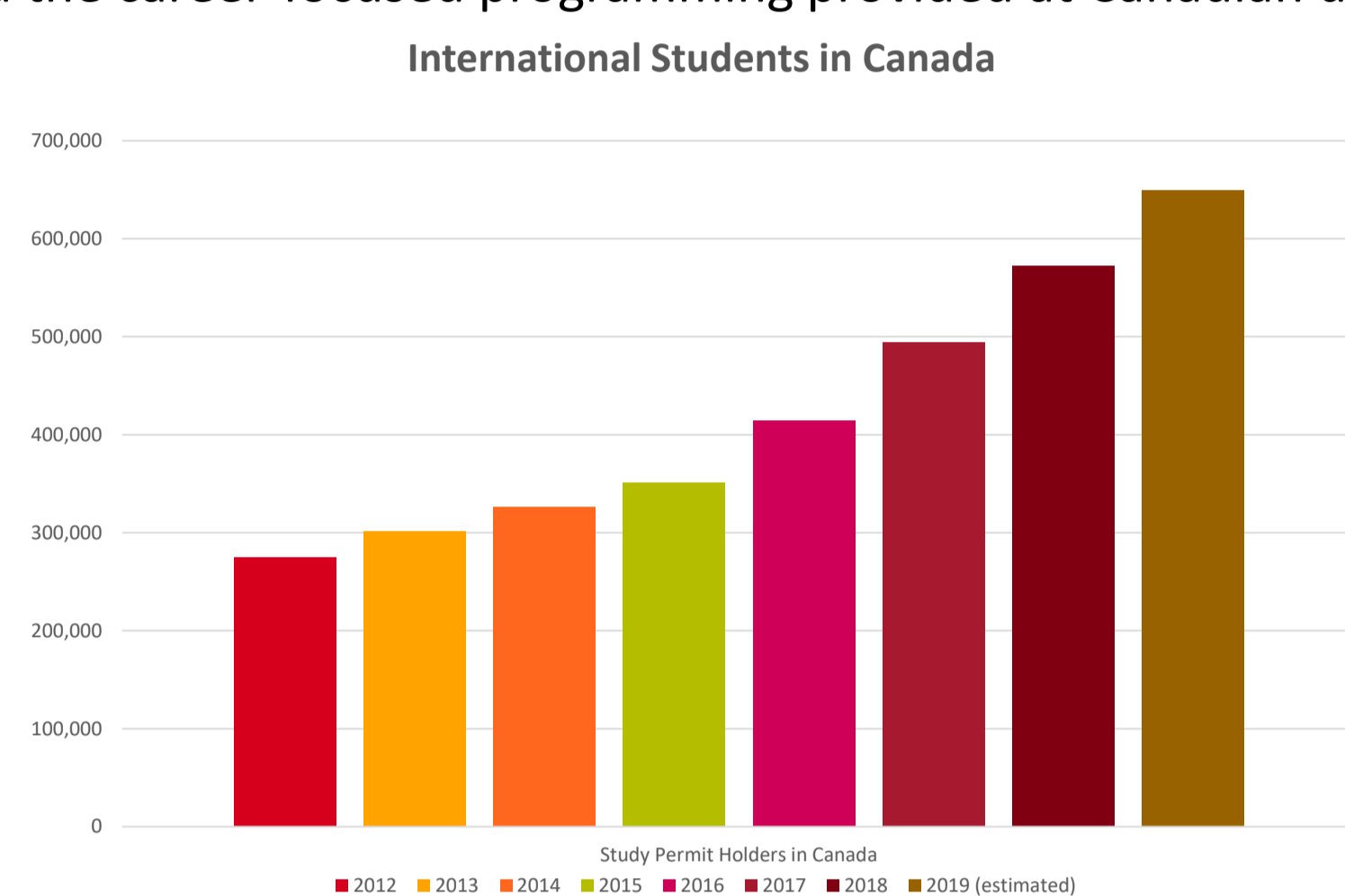
Problem: Canadian HEIs are recruiting and benefiting from increased enrollment of international students. However, there are indications that international students are not as well prepared, and face a number of challenges in transitioning from studies to the workforce in comparison to domestic students.

Key Challenges identified include:
- insufficient language skills;
- lack of host country work experience;
- hesitant employers;
- lack of personal and professional networks;
- lack of job entry support;
- legal barriers; and
- dropping out of academic studies.

"Train and Retain: Career Supports for International Students in Germany, Canada, Netherlands, and Sweden (Morris-Lange & Brands, 2015)

Research Questions, Method & Design

Research Question(s):
The main question that guided this project was:
- What approaches are universities in Canada taking to support international students in the development of professional or career-focused skills?

Secondary questions include:
- What kind of strategies or programming help international students in their transition to the workplace?
- What factors influence institutional approaches to career-focused programming for international students?

Context: Universities from across Canada

Participants: participants were administrators in charge of international portfolios of their respective institutions. Participants' institutions provided differences in the size of the student population, the geographic regions of Canada, and the rural/metropolitan dimension

Data Collection & Analysis:

Survey (descriptive statistics)
- Survey sent to CBIE SACE (Student Advising/Conseiller aux étudiants) Listserv Members
- 29 responses (26 institutions)

Semi-Structured Interviews (discourse analysis)
- Professional staff indicate they are interested in being interviewed
- 8 semi-structured interviews with practitioners from BC, Alberta, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia & Ontario

Documents (content analysis)
- Analysis of documents from the interview participants institution

Recommendations & Conclusion

For Practitioners
- **Coordinated and comprehensive international student supports:** The importance of comprehensive international student supports is a critical factor in international student success.
- **Intercultural training & competency development for all students:** The importance of providing intercultural training and support for all students is an opportunity for programming as well as developing students with skills that are globally focused. Creating meaningful and intentional interactions between domestic and international students is one part of the equation. In the Canadian context, the number of domestic students studying abroad is much lower than comparable countries, including the US and EU countries. Structured and intentional interactions between international and domestic students, for example through career-focused programming, workshops or alumni sessions, provides a good opportunity to develop intercultural competencies through the utilization of on campus programs.
- **Intercultural training & competency development for faculty and staff:** Providing intercultural training and support to university employees is one part of enhancing the student experience of international student, specifically in the area around career supports and understanding the unique challenges faced by students.
- **Engaging with employers – partners in the process:** Universities should engage with employers as partners, creating strategic and ongoing relationships, specifically related to international student employment. University engagement can highlight the value add of international students to all sizes of employers, but specifically for small and medium size businesses, which may be locally focused and not experienced in hiring international graduates.
- **Engaging with employers – debunking myths:** University programming should play an important role in engaging with employers and debunking myths about hiring and retaining international students. Providing opportunities for employers to learn more about the ability to hire international students as workers is also a great chance to engage with them on the topic of intercultural training.
- **Engaging with students early, often and throughout their academic journey:** The final recommendation is also the key recommendation as part of this research. The importance of engaging early and informing students of the importance of starting to think about their goals with regard to their career outcomes. While this may not be the initial impulse of most universities with their programming models, this should be reconsidered. Given the noted importance of employability outcomes for students, the importance of immigration opportunities and the factor of time related to work experience and building a network in Canada, the earlier students are able to engage with career programming, the greater the benefit.

Future Research
- Future research in this field would benefit from an examination of the student experience and outcomes will allow university administration to make better-informed decisions about funding opportunities and strategic engagement with community partners. Another area for future research and will become increasingly relevant is the long-term outcomes of former international students. Specifically issues identified in recent research around the relatively low rate of conversion from international student to PR and concerns around earning disparity between former international students and other groups.

Research Findings & Recommendations

What approaches are universities in Canada taking to support international students in the development of professional or career-focused skills?
- **Highlighted programs being implemented across the country (local partnerships, conferences, programming initiatives):** One key aspect that has emerged is the importance of regional variations and the contextual factors at play with the implementing of programming. The contextual dimension is essential as the various local stakeholders are often best able to respond to the unique needs of the region and are also best able to support students in their career transitions.
- **University as a stepping stone for immigration:** Highlighted the prevalence of the discussion of the link between study and immigration options for international students
- **Universities as a source of international student support:** increased level of expectations/requests from students for institutions to provide a broad range of supports for them throughout their studies
- **Universities as connectors to employers and regions:** The study revealed that the various factors influencing the employability outcomes for international students and the supports being provided are multifaceted and interrelated and universities can play a key role in this process
- **Identified a lack of reference in strategic documents to specific aspects related to the international student experience:** While many internationalization plans refer to increasing international student enrolments and equate it with the increasing intercultural skills, or the creation of "global citizens", this is generally not the case and needs to be addressed. If institutions want to follow through on their strategic goals around internationalization including increasing international enrollments and supporting the development of global competencies for students, they will need to invest in programming including intercultural programs.

Recommendations

For Scholars
- **Research into the Canadian employer landscape in relation to international students:** there is a need for further research in the Canadian context. Specifically, research engaging employers from across Canada with regard to their expectations, experiences, and hesitations with hiring international graduates would provide valuable information for policy makers, institutions and students alike.
- **Research into the alignment of student expectations and realities:** the lure of post-graduation work and immigration pathways are well established as a motivating factor for international students, but the realities are not always clear. Further research is required into the labour market outcomes for former international students who have stayed in Canada to provide a better understanding of the challenges faced in the student to career transitions.

For Policy Makers
- **Create regionally specific programs & initiatives:** Connecting stakeholders with an approach to programming that is geared toward the specific needs and requirements of regions.
- **Highlight and promote successful examples of university, employer, and government engagement:** Career-focused programming in Atlantic Canada emerged from the study as an exemplar for other universities to follow. While the priorities of retaining students will differ throughout Canada, the Atlantic study and stay program is a great example of integrated programming
- **Connect internationalization plans & career programming:** The importance of connecting internationalization plans of universities to the broader community is a key step in bridging the gap in international student employability outcomes. As noted in the findings, many of the career programming approaches are regionally focused and geared toward the needs of international students attending their institution, but also focused on region and community where the institution is located.
- **Facilitate opportunities for networking and building social capital:** The importance of building up social capital is a major challenge for international students who want to enter the workforce post-graduation. Universities can play a key role in facilitating the opportunities for students to engage with employers and off campus stakeholders to network and build their social capital. Universities are uniquely positioned to bring the various stakeholders (students, employers, and government) together for programming and activities given their position and influence in their respective communities. The benefits of this kind of engagement can be viewed as mutually beneficial for all stakeholders. From the institutional standpoint, engagement with international alumni who are able to successfully transition to work are a great recruitment opportunity.

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