



## University Support for International Students Entering Canadian Universities

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### Abstract

This is a literature review of programs offered by universities to international students taking degrees as part of their entry requirements for residency in Canada. Canada lacks the population to sustain its labour markets, due to low domestic birth rates. Over the past decade, federal and provincial governments partnered with post-secondary institutions to develop immigration programs that attract international students. They come to Canada with high expectations of ready access to job markets and many have professional credentials and work experience from their home country. The purpose of this article is to explore ways universities operating in Canada can improve their educational contributions for international students who face numerous barriers as they transition into a new country. Through provision of effective social, psychological, and academic preparation, universities facilitate the transition from entry to the country to the job market. The literature reveals examples of university initiatives and programs that provide international students with accurate information and support early in their entry to Canada such as orientation, support services for information, sense making, and preparation for their education degrees. The student's academic success hinges on sufficient English language skills to participate fully in the education experience and to enter the job market. University faculty and staff design new curriculum for inclusiveness, informality, and social interaction, an unfamiliar classroom to most international students. Although universities have a history of multi-cultural education and diversity policies, more is needed to strengthen inclusiveness. This requires faculty and staff who are keenly aware of the challenges facing international students. While enormous efforts by government and universities resulted in graduation of international students and successful entry into the job market, additional research is essential. The future of the Canadian economy rests upon easier entry of international students to jobs through university programs.

**Keywords:** International Students; Narratives; Teaching and Learning; Multi-cultural Education; Diversity and Inclusion

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the migration experience of international students studying in a master's program in Vancouver, British Columbia. The paper details Canadian immigration programs relevant to the student's obtaining a study and work visa, with attention to the range of immigration tools in use between 2010 and 2012. The paper is structured to weave together the student's migration story with the roles of the key sta-

keholders, the federal and provincial governments, the university faculty and staff in an effort to capture how the stakeholders influence the perspectives and identity of the international students. The paper identifies key initiatives and programs undertaken by universities to facilitate the personal and educational development of the students and to prepare them for post-graduation and entry into labor markets. Canada desperately needs skilled workers and professionals to meet labour market demands. The literature on in-

international students revealed a better understanding of the motivational factors and the complexity of the decision-making process for international students. These students move from one country to another in search of educational, work, and settlement for their family. Universities see this pool of potential students to fill seats in classrooms and to help balance budgets as fewer domestic students are available to meet those needs. Although this seems as an ideal solution for colleges facing enrollment deficits, it cannot be addressed by just adding students.

### Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative methodology, including interviews with six international students who attended a master's program as part of the educational requirements of a Canadian immigration program. The interviews took place from December 2018 through January 2019 in the author's office on the university campus in Vancouver, British Columbia. Prior to the interviews, the author taught the students in classes for organizational behavior, leadership, or change management. During the interview, students told their stories about adapting to the change of living in Canada, the reasons for their decision to migrate to Canada, and the current state of relationships with family, fellow students, and, where applicable, part-time work situations. The interview questions are in Appendix A. The interviews became informal and free-flowing conversations as the student shared their narrative and told stories of his or her transition, leaving the country of birth for settlement in Canada. Students' names and countries in this article include Isabella, Francesca, Katrina, and Marcos from Brazil; Salman from Pakistan; and Paul from South Korea. As this is qualitative research, the findings may not be generalized.

### Appendix

#### Interview Questions:

1. Where is your ancestral home?
2. When did you leave?
3. Whose decision was it for you to leave the ancestral home:
  - a. Mine
  - b. My parents
  - c. My wife
  - d. My wife's family
  - e. Other
4. How important was the ability to take a post-graduate degree to the decision to leave:
  - a. Ancestral home
  - b. Country where I resided prior to coming to Canada
  - c. Other
5. When did you make your first move for the purposes of education?
  6. Where did you go to university for the following?
    - a. Bachelor's or undergraduate degree
    - b. First Master's degree
    - c. Degree from a school of law, medicine, or dentistry
    - d. Other
  7. What factors contributed to your choice of the MAS at FDU-Vancouver? For example:
    - a. Marketing of the MAS program
    - b. Availability of Permanent Residency Program in Canada how did they find out about the PR program?
    - c. Attention to the Permanent Residency Program within the MAS Program. Who told you about the PR program?
    - d. Other
  8. Now that you completed the master's degree, what is your next step?
    9. Where is home now?
      - a. If Canada, why do you want to stay in Canada?
      - b. Other destination?

## Literature Review

Sources for this paper included a variety of books, web sites for government, universities, educational and communication media projects. Content from seven books contributed to this research paper. Topics included developments in multicultural education, diversity and inclusiveness, the Canadian space industry, and social change, with publication between 2000 and 2022. References to eleven peer-reviewed journal articles provided the most up-to-date data analysis and programs for international students entering Canada. Sources from the Internet included eleven web sites included for Canadian governments, agencies, and affiliated stakeholders for immigration programs as well as university web sites and media communication projects underway to strengthen attraction to post-secondary education.

### The federal and provincial governments

The Canadian Immigration System (CIC) includes departments for immigration, refugees, and citizenship; and it welcomes international students because many have professional designations and work experience from their home country that is applicable to Canada's supply needs [1]. The Canadian economy depends upon immigration to sustain its labour markets and much has been done in the last decade to accelerate immigration of international students. The CIC collaborated with federal and provincial governments and related agencies to design new immigration programs that target supply needs in specific labour markets. Since 2013, the CIC implemented programs that proved enormously successful to accelerate immigration of entry of professionals into job markets. The Provincial Residency Nominee Program (PNP) was the most utilized and works in tandem with a comprehensive rating system known as Express Entry that was created in 2015 [2]. The CIC partnered with provinces to identify skills required for specific labour markets through a program known as "international Graduate Category", which combines university education and employment initiatives. Herein, university refers to degree programs in colleges, universities, and technical institutes operating within Canada. The PNP requires the international students to attend a university located on a Canadian campus; and the CIC provides a student and work visa for the duration of the degree program. The work visa enables the international student to acquire work experience in Canada, thus contributing to the student's viability in the labour market [3].

After graduation, students apply for a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) that enables international graduates to work anyw-

here in Canada for up to three years. A recent newsletter published by the CIC reported the following:

- "The median annual earnings received by PRWP holders in this period has increased from \$14,500 in 2008 to \$26,000 in 2018, adjusted to reflect the difference in dollar value over the decade. These earnings suggest an increase in the average amount of labour input" [4].

International graduates working in mining, oil and gas extraction, utilities and public administration received the highest earnings. For graduates working in educational services, administrative and support, waste management, accommodation and food services, and retail trade, earnings were lower. currently, the CIC and provincial governments offer a range of programs for international students to enter the job market. Cohen reported at the beginning of 2019, the CIC's forecasted to accept 331,000 new permanent residents; forecasts for subsequent years were over 400,000 economic immigrants and this was exceeded in 2021 [4]. International students are part of this class of economic immigrants who combine university education with Canadian work experience to achieve entry to its job markets.

### The migration stories

Wu and Wilkes [5] explored the motivation of international students with respect to their post-graduation migration plans, with research studies based on American universities. The authors define the students' migration journey as a search to clarify students' perceptions of home and the ways migration influences their self-identity. Four different ways of perceiving home included the home as the following: "as host, as ancestral, as cosmopolitan, and as nebulous" (124). The host home is where the student feels a fit, spends most of his or her time, and envisions a long-term future in the country. International students define the ancestral home as the country where they retain social attachments to their parents, family, and friends. The cosmopolitan home is one in a vibrant urban area, where the student believes it is possible to acquire work experience that contributes to a career growth. They perceive themselves as global citizens who live in multiple cities and have a confident self-identity and the willingness to let their future unfold. The international student without a concept home, who cannot make the cultural and social transitions in the host country, perceives a nebulous existence, not feeling at home anywhere and lacking identity.

For the international student, the migration begins with a decision to leave the home country; in countries like China, Japan, and Korea, the resident marketing agents recruit international students for colleges and universities in British Columbia, Canada. The agents may have contractual arrangements with universities in Canada, including collecting tuition fees in the home country. Paul's experience with the marketing agent in Korea is particularly gripping as he spoke the following: "I went to an agent who was in a department of the South Korean government and paid \$35,000 to attend a master's program at a university in Canada. After arriving, I discovered it was a private college that only offered an undergraduate degree. I lost all my money".

Paul joined a master's degree program in Vancouver and worked two part-time jobs to support himself while he studied. His exposure to the corrupt, unethical practices of the marketing agent in South Korea demonstrated how easy it is for an international student to lose his investment for a future life in Canada [5]. Paul's story had redeeming features when he told me about his transferable skills from military experience in South Korea. After he graduated from the master's program in Vancouver, he had an encounter with a racist who told him to go back home. Paul stood his ground and explained to his accuser that he was an ordinary individual looking for a fulltime job. In contrast to this Asian story, Brazilian international students rely upon agents located in Vancouver, Canada. In recent years government corruption taught the Brazilian students not to trust marketing agents located in their home country.

For one Brazilian international student, Marcos, his decision to migrate closed the door on any future possibilities to return home. Migrants are keenly aware that travelling to Canada often means starting over again, in education and in their profession, with the success of the migration only measurable over time [6]. Marcos left his dream marketing job in Buenos Aires, a job he took when he was in the middle of applying for immigration to Canada and he did not reveal his intentions to the employer. In his story, Marcos lamented it was not possible for him to return to marketing work in Brazil. Currently, Marcos manages a retail store in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. Isabella is an accomplished Brazilian lawyer who served clients in Africa, Cuba, and other South American countries. In Vancouver, her job in a law firm was limited to the administrative work, which she perceived as demeaning. Her reality is one of feel-

ing excluded from the profession of law, with significant barriers preventing her from practicing in British Columbia [9]. Isabella's husband was at a managerial level with a professional services firm in Rio de Janeiro, Deloitte, a global accounting firm. He hesitated to leave Brazil because in Canada, he believed he had to start at the bottom level of accounting hierarchy. At home in Rio de Janeiro, a Brazilian client had connections in Vancouver, Canada; and this client spoke on behalf of Isabella's husband. He was able to join Deloitte's Vancouver office without any loss of managerial status. Both Isabella and her husband began their migration journey with perceptual errors and wrongful beliefs about professional practice in Canada. Programs for international students, like these at McGill University [6] and McMaster University [8] reveal that student immigrants can be engaged quickly through adequate advising and counselling; and have a more accelerated entry to the job market.

When immigrants arrive in a new country, they make new connections to develop personal and business networks. For Francesca, a Brazilian accountant, her third year in Canada brought new possibilities and a unique migration journey. When CIC offered an entrepreneurial visa that opened the way for her to start a new business, she tapped into her Brazilian business network to create an innovative business that expanded international trade between two countries. On her return trips from Brazil, Francesca carried a cultural object to her home in Canada, establishing her Brazilian and Canadian identity in the new country. By offering a wide range of immigration programs, the CIC gives international students more leeway to shape their future and build on the acumen they bring from the home country.

Her master's studies in Vancouver, British Columbia contributed to her success in business in a new country. In the first week on the university campus, she received a detailed orientation of the university and the city of Vancouver. For academic achievement, subsequent university programs included assessment of language skills; all students gained entry as fulltime students. Those with higher language assessment scores took three courses in a master's degree of administrative sciences (MAS); and those with lower scores took two pre-masters courses in writing and speaking English plus an MAS course. This curriculum strategy enables the international student to prepare for more active engagement in the master's courses; approximately seventy per cent of the MAS students

take the two pre-master's course. Although this delays graduation by one semester, the students have more confidence after the preparatory courses.

These migration stories reflect the social, cultural, and financial barriers that face international students. In this paper consideration focuses on the ways of preventing or diminishing such barriers through effective university initiatives and programs.

### The university

Enabling the international student to adapt to change is critical to his or her success in Canada. It's the role of the university to provide the support early in the student's arrival. Ruel's [7] research on critical sense making provided a structure for the narrative and stories like those told by the international students in Vancouver, Canada. For this research, educators refer to faculty, instructors and administrators on campuses in Canada. Recent program developments at McGill University [8] and McMaster University [9] contributed to the section on teaching and learning. The topic of professional capital comes from research on migration and contributes to an understanding of the experiences of an international student [10]. The paper includes early development of multicultural education at McGill University along with recent initiatives on diversity and inclusion [7].

In applying the framework from Ruel [7] on critical sense making (CSM), educators enable the international students to hear the gap in voices between current and past realities. Sense making is a way of coming to grips with change in personal, family, school, and organizational contexts. Sense making includes intersectionality, which lends credence to the cross-cultural dilemmas faced by international students. Exposure to the gap created by the culture shock poses questions for the international students, such as: 'How do I reconcile life in a different country? How does my self-concept change as a resident of Canada? How will I adapt to this change?'. Therefore, it seems crucial for the international student to be given the opportunity to express the difference in social realities between life in their home country and in Canada. For example, encouraging students to participate in activities such as Toastmasters helps them develop speaking skills and re-build self-esteem.

Narratives and stories contribute to sense making; they provide structure to describe the social world. Ruel described her use of narratives and stories as follows: "a Foucauldian treatment of dis-

course did not negate the importance of interactions; discourses and social interactions worked together, hand-in-hand" [7]. As an international student constructs a narrative of their current reality, they review interactions with others in their home country, the beliefs and values of the home country and how these add to making sense of the move to Canada. The narratives inform the student by contrasting past experiences with the possibilities for the future.

Stories are more loosely contrived and help to make sense of a specific situation. The story characterizes behavior of the individuals involved, according to relevant rules of the society or an organization. Oyeniyi, Smith, Watson and Nelson studied the first-year experience of international students in undergraduate and graduate levels in two American universities [10]. The authors described the students' culture shock as an effort to adapt to the new country's culture, climate, and language. Evident was the faculty and staff's lack of empathy for the international students. In particular, the students' inability to communicate caused the greatest sense of isolation. The students were inhibited by their "language deficits", further reducing social interaction and exacerbating stress. Institutions that acknowledged the language dilemma of international students realized the higher risk of anxiety, suicide, and depression for these students in contrast to the university's domestic population.

Sensemaking enables the international student to explore self-identity and move toward assigning meaning to new life as a resident of Canada [12]. Drawing upon the social psychological approach of sensemaking in organizations helps international students reflect upon their migration experiences [13]. One begins with the question of 'who am I' and searching for an identity grounded in experiences and interaction with others. These anchors bring meaning to past organizational events and help make sense of a current event. Interpretation of an event focuses on the policies, rules, and procedures that are like a map guiding the organization. Sensemaking involves interpretation of parts of the map to bring focus to a current event. When an organizational event takes place, plausibility may determine action instead of reliance on more accurate perceptions. This happens due to a variation in response of stakeholders, as they interpret organizational rules in different ways when an event takes place. In the organizational context, sensemaking relates to perception and history to constrain or enact an individual. Sense making depends upon interaction with others; it

evolves and does not end, individual actions follow. Engaging international students in workshops that teach reflection and identity facilitate their development of work and life balance in the new country [9-11].

For the international student, their anchors for personal life and professional work are left behind in the home country. Although family and social values still resonate, they stretch to acquire new anchors to stay in Canada. After the death of her father, Rosa became the financial supporter for the family in the Philippines. During the interview, she mentioned this responsibility frequently. She easily passed the examinations in British Columbia to become a registered nurse and worked part-time throughout the master's program. Emotional issues from family relationships may cloud the sense making of the international student. Katrina claimed her soul remained in Brazil, after a family suicide complicated family life in both Brazil and Canada. As cited in Ruel [7], application of the CSM framework encourages consideration of social values, perspective taking, and the organizational rules.

### Teaching the international student

For educators, the social constructivist approach dominates the classroom design for engaging international students. Their transition to life in Canada has unique educational requirements in addition to the financial and social upheaval for the family. The availability of university support services enables them to adapt to campus life and contributes to academic achievement. By designing initiatives, programs, and services to welcome the students their learning experience is likely to be more successful. With attention to four dimensions of the arrival, learning, living and support universities diminish the cross-cultural barriers for the international students and strengthens inclusion [14]. The learning experience had the most influence on student satisfaction. A positive arrival experience included pre-arrival information, advice on the visa application process, pick up from the airport, first-night accommodation, an orientation program, and social activities to initiate campus relationships. In addition, creating awareness of campus resources lessened the tension for the new arrival.

Attention to the student's life outside of the classroom offered an equal amount of hardship as the international student faced the novelty of a Canadian campus. Student support services add directly to the international student's satisfaction, including provision of adequate orientation to the programs and guidance to access the

services [15]. The families of international students experience a culture shock as they navigate Canadian immigration regulations, housing and financial challenges, and the challenges of cross-cultural communication at school and work. University support services that include counselling reduces the isolation and loneliness of a new campus. Counsellors facilitate transition by addressing how to adapt, develop relationships and seek peer support. This includes learning how to promote on-campus relationships through volunteer and student organizations, student leadership programs, and social activities in university residences.

Learning on a Canadian campus includes exposure to new curriculum and course design, and a different classroom culture, one that is less formal with more interaction between teachers and students. The informality of the classroom culture presents a significant barrier for the international student. The classroom culture includes the way students interact and the level of informality or formality for communication between the students and the faculty. Most international students are used to a teacher-centered post-secondary experience, which does not encourage the student's curiosity and openness. At Ryerson University in Toronto, faculty learn ways of teaching to the diverse student population, through application of culturally responsive teaching styles, universal design of learning, and teachable moments. A teachable moment is an unplanned opportunity for a teacher to offer insight to a concept that has caught students' attention during a class. International students bring unique life experiences to the classroom discussion and an awkward silence may emerge that threatens the inclusiveness of the class [8]. The professor may rescue an uncomfortable situation with a teachable moment that offers insight, helping the students to bridge the cross-cultural situations that threaten the inclusive nature of the classroom.

One of the strengths of Canadian education is a multicultural theme that reflects society as a mosaic of cultures. Teacher education in Canada embraces multicultural principles and serves to acknowledge the educator's role in promoting acceptance of differences and provision of a safe space for all students. In universities, educators build upon Ghosh and Galczynski and Ghosh's [10] four principles of multicultural education: allow all student to fully develop their potential and critical abilities, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or class, validate a right to differences in race, ethnicity, gender and class; address students from both dominant and minority groups; and permeate the curriculum and the school culture with multi-

cultural themes. At McGill University's school of education, Ghosh pursued her dream with a pedagogy of diversity, fulfilling her dream for Canadian school teachers. This included establishment of the Preventing Extremism through Educational Research, known as PEER [6]. Together with Galczynski they sought to persuade Canadian educators to bring multiculturalism into their classroom pedagogy and professional practice. They restated the history of multicultural education, offered teaching strategies and assessment techniques, provided anti-racist programs, suggested the benefits of teachers changing their worldviews, and generated discussion of multicultural topics among educators.

Instructional strategies for multicultural education incorporate the values of equity, fairness, and a sense of justice with the goal of inclusiveness [15]. Teaching methods involved student experiences to engage feelings and emotions in the learning process. One multi-cultural learning experience included three-phases; in the first, students and faculty jointly determined what the students know and their interests. The second phase involved cooperative learning by inviting students to share ideas and experiences, including use of a variety of communication media. Generalization was the third phase, where faculty facilitated integration of content through higher-order thinking, learning meta-cognitive skills to reflect on their experiences and understand the implications of the learning. This approach offered both the educator and the international students a learning venue that facilitated cross-cultural transition.

Despite the existence of diversity policy and programs in Canadian universities, achievement of inclusiveness takes considerable leadership and resources. Frost [16] emphasized that inclusive practices require change management strategies: "Diversity is a reality. Inclusion is a choice. Inclusive leadership is required to help us acknowledge current reality and frame the conversation in such a way that people can choose to act on the inclusion imperative" [p. 83]. While international students face the daunting task of migration, university educators and administrators require an infrastructure of academic and support services to implement inclusive teaching and learning for a diverse student population. Few campuses have the combination of a focused diversity infrastructure of academic and social support required to achieve inclusive education for international students.

### The labour market

After completing their university studies, the international graduates face additional barriers when trying to obtain licensing th-

rough professional groups and entry to the workforce. Professional capital is a term that helps to identify the combination of human capital, social capital, and decisional capital that characterize a profession. Human capital are the qualifying criteria that identify entry to the profession. Social capital is the relationships among colleagues and the community of professionals whose collaboration contributes to improving performance over time. Decisional capital is the accumulation of experience that comes from the day-to-day judgements and improvisations made over time. Gladwell [17] claimed that 10,000 hours of practice was the rule for success in a field or profession; this equates to 8 years of practice. Professions are differentiated according to the licensing criteria in the field of practice, and Canada has a rigorous licensing process in most professional fields, particularly in education, medicine, and the applied sciences. Licensing involves examinations and these remain an important entry to professions; however, professional work experience from another country tends to be ignored by employers. As a result, international students start at the bottom levels of their profession, and it may take years to move to adequate levels of employment income and status within the profession. Until demonstrated through practice in the Canadian context, the professional capital of immigrants remains unknown. Obtaining a licensing to practice involve a rigorous regime of expensive examinations in teaching, dentistry, medicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy, nursing, and engineering. Recent improvements in the licensing for accounting, nursing, and physiotherapy made entry to the labour market more accessible. Collaboration between employers and licensing agencies helps to codify the professional experience of immigrants and lessen their barriers to the labour market.

Dentistry provides a useful example of the educational and licensing issues for professionals moving between countries. In Canada and India, dental school involves five years of university studies, but Indian dentists lack competency in anatomy, which is essential to adequately practice dentistry in Canada. Licensing for an immigrant dentist is expensive and requires a minimum of three examinations. In other health care professions, the expectation for newcomers is to start at the same level as a Canadian graduate from an undergraduate degree. This is punitive when the migrant has substantial credentials and experience to contribute. More collaboration between federal and provincial agencies and related licensing groups may improve entry of qualified immigrants to professions.

## Conclusion

The Canadian governments welcome foreign workers and international students through a variety of immigration programs. Current perceptions suggest the country provides a safe environment for international students, both for education and permanent residency. Canada is becoming more diverse as it seeks to replace current workers who are retiring or preparing to retire. The country's low domestic birth rate is a driving force for immigration, encouraging international students to come to Canada. The easiest entry for international students is Canada's permanent residency programs. At post-secondary institutions, students interact in a class setting and the schools provide support services to help students adapt and make sense of the cross-cultural experience. Support services such as orientation programs, counselling services, and social activities on campus help the international student and their family blend into campus life.

A university is a place that has a goal to prepare the students for their future. To be successful, these students need to understand what is needed when they enter the Canadian workplace. Educators need to ensure curriculum and learning design meet the needs for academic achievement and inclusiveness. Introduction to professional capital enables one to understand the match between CIC programs and the transition of the student from university to the labour markets in Canadian provinces. Additional research on best practices of support services needs to be completed, and benchmarking should be instituted so that international students receive the best services. The future of the Canadian economy rests on the immigrants who come as students and decide to stay in the country as a permanent resident or entrepreneur.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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