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January 2015

## International Students as ‘Ideal Immigrants’ in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers’ assumptions and the lived experiences of international students

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**International Students as ‘Ideal Immigrants’ in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers’ assumptions and the voices of international students**  
**Étudiants internationaux en tant qu’« Immigrants idéals » au Canada : Une déconnexion entre les assumptions des décideurs de politique et les expériences vécues des étudiants internationaux**

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**Abstract**

Recent policy changes in Canada highlight the strategic role of International Students (IS) in the country’s economic development and future prosperity. With the release of Canada’s first international education strategy, the federal government has intimately tied international education to the domestic economy by attracting and retaining skilled workers to prepare Canada for the global market place. IS are particularly desirable candidates for permanent residency because their Canadian credentials, proficiency in at least one official language, and their relevant Canadian work experience is assumed to allow them to integrate more easily into the labour force upon graduation. Through 11 focus groups with 48 IS from two post-secondary institutions in the province of Ontario, we explored the adjustment of IS as they adapt to Canada and transition from student to worker. Thematic analysis suggests a disconnect between policy makers’ assumptions and the lived experiences of IS in Canada. Specifically, we find that IS’ integration into the domestic labour market is hindered by adjustment difficulties pertaining to language abilities, poor connectedness to host communities, and perceived employer discrimination against IS.

**Résumé**

De récents changements de politique au Canada soulignent le rôle stratégique des étudiants internationaux (EI) dans le développement économique et la future prospérité du pays. Avec la sortie de la première stratégie d’éducation internationale du Canada, le gouvernement fédéral a intimement lié l’éducation internationale à l’économie nationale en attirant et en retenant des travailleurs qualifiés afin de préparer le Canada pour une place sur le marché global. Les EI sont des candidats particulièrement souhaitables pour la résidence permanente parce que leurs accréditations canadiennes, leur maîtrise d’au-moins une langue officielle, et leur pertinente expérience de travail au Canada sont supposées leur permettre d’intégrer plus facilement le marché du travail après leur graduation. À travers 11 discussions de groupe avec 48 EI provenant de deux institutions d’enseignement supérieur dans la province d’Ontario, nous avons exploré l’ajustement des EI alors qu’ils s’adaptent au Canada et font la transition d’étudiant à travailleur. Une analyse thématique suggère une déconnexion entre les assumptions des décideurs de politique et les expériences vécues des EI au Canada. Plus précisément, nous trouvons que l’intégration des EI dans le marché du travail domestique est entravée par des difficultés d’ajustement liées aux compétences linguistiques, à une mauvaise connectivité avec les communautés d’accueil, et une discrimination perçue des employeurs envers les EI.

**Key Words:** International Students; Psychosocial Adjustment; International Education; Canada; Labour Market Integration; Immigration  
**Mots-clés:** étudiants internationaux, ajustement psychosocial, éducation internationale, Canada, intégration au marché du travail, immigration

## Introduction

International education allows for intercultural learning and networking and is a source of skilled labour when international students (IS) can be retained upon graduation and effectively integrated into the local labour market. In this paper, we argue that the impact of international education is dependent on the positive adjustment of IS to their new cultural setting. In Canada, the ever-increasing internationalization of business and trade, the need to fund post-secondary institutions amidst rising costs, and a projected shortage of skilled labour make international education a critical area for applied research. Ontario, as Canada's largest province, receives nearly half of all IS (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2014), presenting an important case study for understanding the challenges and opportunities IS face when adjusting to life in Canada. A better understanding of the lived experiences of IS is of clear importance to policy makers in government, staff at post-secondary institutions, as well as IS themselves.

International education has become a competitive global industry with leading economies jockeying for position. As a result, leading and emerging economic leaders have all made substantive changes to their international education policies in the hopes of becoming more attractive destinations for foreign students (Schneider, 2000). In Canada, recent policy changes have emphasized IS recruitment and retention, making international education a key component of the government's economic strategy (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2013; Government of Canada, 2014). In the last two-and-a-half decades, the total number of foreign students studying in Canada has increased from 77,235 in 1988, to an all-time high of 328,672 in 2012; an increase of more than 325% (CIC, 2013). Government policy makers are currently embarking on an ambitious agenda to further increase the number of IS studying in Canada to over 450,000 by 2022 (Government of Canada 2014). For their part, the Canadian government is investing heavily in international education, crafting the country's first-ever *International Education Strategy* as a "blueprint to attract talent to Canada and prepare our country for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Government of Canada, 2014).

The rationale underlying recent policy changes toward international education is the assumption that upon graduation, IS make for 'ideal' immigrants as they are assumed to be adequately adjusted to Canadian society, having already undergone Canadian education and training (Government of Canada, 2014). Because of their Canadian post-secondary credentials, proficiency in at least one official language, and their relevant Canadian work experience, IS, relative to other classes of immigrants, are believed to integrate with less difficulty into the Canadian labour market (CIC, 2013; Government of Canada, 2014). This assumption has recently been contested in other IS-receiving countries. In Australia, for example, while IS graduates achieved comparable rates of labour market participation as other immigrants, IS graduates actually had lower salaries, lower job satisfaction and relied less frequently on their formal qualifications than other migrants (Hawthorne, 2010). Indeed, IS who were recruited to Australia on short, "two year courses" or in "oversubscribed fields" actually had worse outcomes than other migrants. In response to the relatively poorer adjustment of IS in Australia, between 2007 and 2011, the Australian government began to introduce major policy reforms to improve the outcomes of IS who apply under their skilled workers programs.

The success of Canada's international education policy is dependent on the integration and retention of IS. Guided by a framework of cross-cultural adaptation

(Searle & Ward, 1990), this study employs thematic analysis of focus group data to explore the lived experiences of IS as they transition into the Canadian labour market at two post-secondary institutions popular among IS in the province of Ontario. IS face numerous psychosocial challenges; living and studying abroad may present obstacles that include dealing with discrimination, loneliness and academic difficulties (Gui, Safdar, Berry, & Zheng, 2014). Intercultural experiences can influence individual health outcomes and general wellbeing (Berry, 2006) and by extension, affect the adjustment of IS in Canada. While there is an extensive and well-established body of research on IS adjustment, there is a need for more research on challenges that IS face as they transition from student to worker (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

We begin with a brief review of international education in Canada and the recent policy changes intended to maximize the economic impact of international education. Next, we describe a framework of cross-cultural adjustment and explore its bearing on IS' psychosocial adaptation to life in the province of Ontario. Finally, we present our research and discuss key challenges policy makers must address pertaining to IS' psychosocial adjustment as they transition from student to worker in the province's labour market.

### **The Canadian Context**

IS are a strategic component of the Government of Canada's *Economic Action Plan*, its international trade and innovation strategies, and its immigration and foreign policy (Government of Canada, 2014, p. xviii). Recent changes to Canadian international education policy aim to make the country a "21<sup>st</sup> century leader in international education in order to attract top talent and prepare our citizens for the global marketplace" (Government of Canada, 2014, p. 1). As part of an aggressive policy drive, the Government of Canada aims to increase the number of IS studying in the country. In doing so, the government estimates its goal of attracting 450,000 IS by 2022 will create 86,500 new jobs, increase the expenditure of IS in Canada to an estimated \$16.1 billion, providing an annual boost to the Canadian economy of almost \$10 billion, and generate approximately \$910 million in new tax revenue (Government of Canada, 2014).

As Canada's largest IS-receiving province, the impact of international education in the country is shaped by the experiences of IS in Ontario. In 2012, 41.9% of ISs studying in Canada came to the province, generating \$3.5 billion. In 2010, the province was responsible for more than one-third of all employment generated by international education across the country (CIC, 2013). The IS experience in Ontario, therefore, is an area that warrants further attention by researchers and policy makers alike.

### **Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students: Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment**

The adjustment processes that take place during periods of cultural transitions can be divided into two domains – psychological and sociocultural. Although related, the two are conceptually distinct (Berry, 2006; Ward & Searle, 1991). Emerging from a framework of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), psychological adjustment concerns general feelings of wellness and satisfaction. Psychological adjustment is commonly assessed through measures of negative affect (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010) as well as through measures of depression or mood disturbance (e.g.,

Safdar, Struthers, & van Oudenhoven, 2009). Psychological adjustment has also been shown to vary with individual differences in personality (Goodson & Zhang, 2010), daily hassles (Safdar, Lay & Struthers, 2003) and identification with home and host cultures (Playford & Safdar, 2007). On the other hand, sociocultural adjustment concerns one's ability to "fit in," (Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006, p. 488) by successfully negotiating cultural and social aspects of the host society. Sociocultural adjustment is understood as a process of social learning and typically improves over time, varying with respect to cultural distance, language ability and satisfaction with contact with host nationals (Hickey, O'Reilly & Ryan, 2010; Nguyen-Michel, Unger, Hamilton & Spruijt-Metz, 2006).

Studying at the post-secondary level is a stressful period for all students as they experience changing social, financial and academic expectations. However, as research shows, IS have a particularly hard time adjusting compared to their domestic peers due to the added burden induced by cultural differences (Andrade, 2006). In many cases, IS experience linguistic and communication difficulties that negatively impact their ability to excel academically and form meaningful relationships with students of the host society (Aune, Hendrickson, & Rosen, 2011; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). Despite the services and supports available to help IS adjust to their new cultural context, many fail to access the programs available to them, contributing to poorer mental health and adjustment outcomes (Mendelsohn, 2002; Mori, 2000). Adding stress to the IS experience is that many IS report feeling discriminated against (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Factors such language ability, the degree of IS' identification with their hosts' culture, or whether they feel discriminated against, for instance, influence the extent of intercultural contact sought by IS (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Intercultural contact, in turn, has the potential to improve language skills, and generate the social interactions that foster the cross-cultural friendships necessary to build support networks and facilitate cultural sharing. Contact between IS and their domestic peers also promote mutual understanding that acts to reduce stereotypes and discrimination (Allport, 1954; Berry, 2006; Li & Gasser, 2005). For example, it has been found that IS with higher levels of social support experience lower levels of loneliness and stress, and thus adapt to the host country more easily (Hickey et al., 2010). In a Canadian study, Safdar and colleagues (2010) reported that many expressed concern that they had less than desirable interactions with the local students. Intercultural contact, therefore, is an important domain affecting the integration and success of IS, with reciprocal influences on psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

One of the barriers to adjustment of IS that has received considerable attention in the literature is perception of discrimination (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In a study of IS in the United Kingdom, it was found that one-third of the students experienced some form of racism (Brown & Jones, 2013). Racism is commonly associated with a negative feeling towards the host country and homesickness (Brown & Jones, 2013). It has been reported that IS who report lower levels of perceived discrimination and higher levels of social connectedness were more likely to stay in their host country than those with higher level of discrimination and lower level of social connectedness (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011).

## **The Present Study**

Despite the narrative that IS make for ‘ideal immigrants’ because their Canadian experiences allow for easy integration into society and the labour force, a large body of psychological research suggests that the adjustment experience of IS are fraught with challenges. We assessed the extent to which the lived experiences of IS in Canada align with policy makers’ assumptions pertaining to their adjustment and integration into the local labour market. We conducted nearly a dozen focus groups with IS at two post-secondary institutions that are popular among IS in Ontario.

Applying thematic analysis to our focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we identified several themes related to adjustment and integration difficulties that challenge the assumption of policy makers and risk to undermine the goals of Canada’s *International Education Strategy*. Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative research technique that serves as a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Guided by recent research in cross-cultural adjustment, we explored our focus group data for themes that capture important aspects of IS’ experiences adjusting to, and working within, Canadian society. Our aim in applying thematic analysis to our data was to provide an account of IS’ experiences transitioning from student to worker in Canada and to evaluate these accounts against the federal government’s central policy assumption that IS, by their very nature, adjust positively and integrate successfully into the Canadian labour market.

## **Method**

***Case selection and participants.*** Two Canadian universities in the province of Ontario were selected as cases of study, one a large university located within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and the other a mid-size university located outside the GTA<sup>1</sup>. Participants were upper-year undergraduate and graduate students; some international exchange students ( $n = 3$ ) also participated. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling and through contacts with IS liaison officers at both institutions. Forty-eight IS (24 from each institution) participated in the study. In total, eleven focus groups lasting approximately two hours were held during January and February 2014<sup>2</sup>. (See Table 1.)

***Analysis.*** Structured in-depth focus group data was transcribed verbatim and explored through a guiding framework of applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, a standardized coding scheme was developed. Second, researchers worked in teams of two and separately analyzed data from the two universities. Third, we undertook a critical assessment of unique and shared themes pertaining to adjustment before collapsing across cases and revisiting the data in collaboration. Commonalities were identified and shared barriers to adjustment were explored.

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<sup>1</sup> York University is one of the largest post-secondary institutions in Canada with respect to the number of registered students and is located within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA; AUCC, 2014). The University of Guelph ranks highest in the country among IS satisfaction (University of Guelph, 2013) and is located outside the GTA.

<sup>2</sup> Two international students participated in one-on-one interviews.

*Table 1. Participant characteristics at each institution.*

|   | University of Guelph<br>( <i>n</i> = 24) | York<br><i>n</i> = 24) | University |
|---|--|------------------------|------------|
| Age Group   |  |                        |            |
| 18-23   | 10                                       | 11                     |            |
| 24-30   | 13                                       | 13                     |            |
| 41-50   | 1  |                        |            |
| Gender  | 8 (33.3%)                                | 4 (16.7%)              |            |
| Males   | 16 (66.7%)                               | 20 (80.3%)             |            |
| Females   |  |                        |            |
| Average number of months in Canada                        | 30.9                                     | 45.4                   |            |
| Participants with on-campus work experience               | 50.0%                                    | 70.8%                  |            |
| Participants with off-campus work experience              | 40.9%                                    | 66.7%                  |            |
| Percentage intending to remain in Canada after graduation | 72.7%                                    | 83.3%                  |            |
| Current Status in Canada                                  |  |                        |            |
| Still in School   | 66.7%                                    | 66.7%                  |            |
| Graduated, not working                                    | -  | 4.2%                   |            |
| Graduated, working full time                              | 8.3%                                     | 20.8%                  |            |
| Graduated, working part time                              | 4.2%                                     | 8.3%                   |            |
| Field of Study  |  |                        |            |
| Arts & Humanities   | 25.0%                                    | 54.2%                  |            |
| Arts & Sciences   | 4.2%                                     | 20.8%                  |            |
| Commerce or Business                                      | 8.3%                                     | 8.3%                   |            |
| Sciences  | 33.3%                                    | 8.3%                   |            |
| Engineering   | 12.5%                                    | -                      |            |
| Education   | -  | 4.2%                   |            |
| Environmental Studies                                     | -  | 4.2%                   |            |
| Geographic Region   |  |                        |            |
| Africa  | 4.2%                                     | 12.5%                  |            |
| Asia  | 45.8%                                    | 50.0%                  |            |
| Caribbean   | 4.2%                                     | 25.0%                  |            |
| Europe  | 8.3%                                     | -                      |            |
| Latin America   | 25.0%                                    | 4.2%                   |            |
| Middle East   | 8.3%                                     | 4.2%                   |            |
| North America   | 4.2%                                     | 4.2%                   |            |



## **Results and Discussion**

Overall, IS participants held their university experience in high regard and spoke positively about the caliber of education available from their respective universities. Not only did IS in our focus groups value their education experience in Canada, but several expressed a high level of engagement between students and IS-serving programs and services available on campus. Focus group participants tended to agree that, “the way we learn back home is very different from Canada,” noting that, “the way [Canadians] do things academically is quite unique.” This uniqueness in the delivery of education is bolstered by professors who are available for students’ assistance (“they are always there; their doors are open”), and multifaceted assessments where a combination of group work and presentations facilitate IS confidence in interpersonal skills, an essential skillset for learning appropriate conduct in professional setting.

As our demographic questionnaire revealed, most employment opportunities held by IS were on-campus as opposed to in the wider community. As the principle employer of IS, universities have an important role to play in preparing IS for the labour force. At the institutional level, IS spoke about the opportunities for on-campus jobs, volunteer opportunities, residence life and research experience with professors as key factors that enable them to build networks and friendships. Many students used these opportunities as stepping-stones toward future employment. For example, as one participant remarked, “I worked a lot while I was in university...a lot of on-campus [jobs] that...rolled over into fulltime work.” Additionally, IS who had on-campus work experience noted that, as an employer, the university community was highly supportive and appreciative of IS. On-campus employers worked around IS’ schedules and were generally perceived as being flexible and understanding to the workloads of IS. As one participant put it, “...because it’s an academic setting, [the employers here] know that your priority [is] your grades and your classes...employers here understand that they are employing student workers.”

Despite these findings, the positive aspects pertaining to IS’ university experience did not extend to the entire student sample, much less the wider communities in which IS reside. Consistent with past research involving IS (e.g, Andrade, 2006; Safdar, Chuong, McKenzie & Uhm, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), data from our focus groups suggests barriers remain to the socio-cultural adaptation of IS that might impede their ability to integrate successfully into the workforce. We present our analyses around three major themes pertaining to the psychosocial adjustment of IS: Language and communication; community connectedness and identity; and, perceptions of discrimination.

Before exploring each of these themes in more detail, we note that our focus groups reveal an overall experience that is quite positive for the vast majority of students. However, in light of recent policy changes and Canada’s interests in recruiting and retaining IS, we hope to bring attention to the struggles many students face that impede their ability to adjust to their new environment and integrate into the Canadian labour market after graduation.

### ***Barriers to Language & Communication***

In line with much of the research on IS adjustment, IS in our sample reported language and communication challenges as a major obstacle to be overcome if they are to successfully transition from student to worker in Canada. Many IS, for whom English is their second or third language, spoke about language difficulties and low levels of language confidence. Unlike most domestic students, IS are typically faced with the additional burden of managing academic workloads in a non-native language. Many IS reported being unaware of or having insufficient access to on-campus support programs and services. Those IS who availed such services spoke of their continued challenges with the specialized vocabulary needed to be successful in upper-year courses and professional settings. Difficulty with English language is also reported in other studies. For example, in a cross-cultural study from nine countries including Canada, it was reported that one of the main challenges that IS face is English writing skills (Xu, 2008). Xu argues ensuring IS' success within this domain requires mentoring and time.

IS are often challenged by difficulties with language comprehension and understanding communication patterns early on in their studies. Despite speaking highly of the quality of education they receive, IS noted how the delivery of lessons differs from what they are accustomed to in their home country. As one student remarked, despite a strong academic background in their field, the pace of lectures and complexity of the material hurt their academic performance as they continued to struggle with comprehension and keeping up with lecturers. This IS commented,

[O]ne of my challenges...was in my first semester. I was having trouble interpreting the science heavy courses, because I had been training in Colombia to learn science, biology, chemistry, physics – all in Spanish – and then you come here and you have all those lectures in English, I actually found that in the first semester, I had to still write all my notes in Spanish because it was easier for me to translate in my head and write in Spanish then to write in English while listening.

Another participant noted presentation-style assessments are particularly daunting, “because, right now, we are not that confident with our English, so to go up right now and speak for 15 minutes in front of everybody, it’s quite a challenge.” Other students reported concerns of having to adjust to different professors’ communication styles and accents, often causing them to experience anxiety that perhaps “we [may never] get used to it.” Several students also spoke of their confusion regarding academic dishonesty, as well as the lack of awareness on behalf of staff and faculty of the cultural differences in academic adjustment leaves IS feeling further isolated and dejected.

These same language and communication challenges follow IS from their academic institutions to the labour market. For example, several participants expressed their anxiety that prospective employers primarily judged international applicants on their ability to communicate like locals. As one participant who has also spent much time working with and hiring IS remarked, language difficulties “can be challenging, especially when it comes to...applying for a job, and being [seriously stressed] and slip[ing] through the cracks because you got two words backward, and you know, freak out, because it definitely is a huge thing.” Many IS were concerned that their

subjectively weak language and communication skills hinder their likelihood of finding employment, especially in career-related fields. Generally, there is a perception that language ability “definitely reflects on whether somebody is employable or not.”

For IS, language and communication ability and employability are directly related, with strong language and communication skills putting IS “on a level playing field” with Canadian students competing for jobs. As one focus group participant remarked,

English is kind of the first [skill] that people are analyzing or judging you [by]; they correlate it with your competence...and sometimes it's not true, because I consider myself very good in physics, calculus, and all these things, and I could not show it in the first meeting with my employer.

In sum, language and communication difficulties are a significant source of stress for IS where low confidence in ability may lead to embarrassment in classrooms and hinder performance during interviews, impeding their academic performance and creating obstacles to finding ideal employment opportunities. Additionally, language ability is essential for IS to develop the communication skills and confidence necessary to become engaged in the communities in which they live (which in turn creates new opportunities to build language skills and social/ career networks). The effect of language barriers on adjustment of IS is well documented (e.g. Andrade, 2006; Hickey et al., 2010; Mori, 2000; Safdar et al., 2010).

### ***Community Connectedness, and Struggles with Identity: Challenges to Belonging and Wellness***

Our findings re-affirm those from a Canadian study by Safdar and colleagues (2010) who highlight the need for strategic and planned IS support; simply having IS in the same classroom as local students does not foster meaningful social interaction and learning between the two groups. Contact between IS and members of the host society is important for promoting intercultural knowledge among international and domestic students alike. Moreover, contact promotes the growth of social support networks, a lack of which has been previously shown to negatively affect the adjustment and wellbeing of IS in their host society (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In short, contact is essential for building the social ties and sense of belonging necessary to facilitate intercultural learning and wellbeing.

One of the features of Canadian society that several IS participants spoke most warmly about was the welcoming environment in which they found themselves.

I think it's a nice community. Because they make you feel welcome, and they help you. And that's the first thing that struck me: how nice, and how polite, and how engaged people were. And I think that if you sincerely try to seek help, you shall find it here, and that's what I realized.

Speaking about the efforts made by some IS support staff to build a feeling of belonging and community connectedness, one student remarked:

...they also have this [IS program] where they connect you to a student here at the university, so the student can show[around the campus and the city]. That was very good for me because I arrived here not knowing too much [about] where everything is...and actually, my [program] partner helped me to...appreciate being here, you know? So it was very good for me, because you don't feel, like, alone in the world, you have a friend.

It was really good.

While several IS expressed appreciation for orientation and first year programs offered to them during their initial transition experience, most also expressed frustration at not having meaningful supports beyond their first year of study, especially when it comes to locating and negotiating off-campus employment. Our study clearly established the need for services to be offered continuously to IS as participants also reported experiencing feelings of loneliness and social isolation beyond their first year.

Most IS expressed a strong desire to transition into the Canadian labour force after graduation, however many cited their family back home, unexpectedly high costs of living, or poor prospects of finding work in their field as factors that would induce them to leave Ontario or even Canada after graduation. The retention of IS after graduation is of fundamental importance to Canada's *International Education Strategy*; building up students' feelings of belonging and community connectedness is one way in which IS might be encouraged to remain in Canada after completing their studies. The need for better connectedness to IS' host community – and in particular with professional networks – was perhaps best captured by one student's discontent that university cafeteria services had limited hours and were not available on public holidays. When asked why the student simply had not planned ahead for such an occasion, the participant replied, "I don't really go off campus because most of my time I spend in my life doing research," adding that the work was often tedious and isolating.

Although most expressed a desire to stay in Canada after graduation, participants were realistic about their expectations for finding work in their field, lamenting a lack of professional development opportunities during their study. In particular, IS expressed concern that they were not afforded the same opportunities for networking and off-campus employment as domestic students, something IS felt was lacking in their university experience. Specifically, IS in our sample believed a lack of co-operative education opportunities and ways to connect with industry professionals contributes to their relative under-preparedness for working in Canada after graduation. As one participant put it, it's about "who you know, not what you know," when it comes to finding work in Canada. Supporting this claim, many of the participants who were currently employed spoke about how it was their connections with employers made during their studies that allowed them to find jobs after graduation.

In line with studies of cross-cultural transition and mental health (e.g., Berry, 2005, 2006), focus group participants also identified psychological identification with their home and host cultures as an important factor affecting wellbeing and ability to integrate into the workforce. Several participants spoke about the importance of stepping back from one's heritage culture and embracing a Canadian identity. For example, as one participant noted, "just being in Canada, you are in [a] different countr[y] all the time. And, it's even harder, because you have to preserve that [heritage] cultural identity as well as, like, forming a kind of Canadian [identity]..."

Emphasizing the implications of "becoming Canadian" for IS' work prospects, another participant responded,

I think, for me as an IS right now, your best bet is how you market yourself. As long as you show that you don't have any cultural differences, you understand the society, you can behave the way they anticipate you to behave and you have the grades for it, I think that is the best bet to integrate with the labour force...I don't know anyone here, so I

can't say that I am going to rely on my professors to get me into contact with an industry...[T]he best bet for me would be to be on top of my game.

Focus group participants who had accumulated work experience agreed with the above assessments, noting the importance of understanding Canadian workplace norms to be better able to succeed during hiring. IS believed that "they [employers] want you to be a certain way, and act a certain way, and look a certain way." However, without sufficient work experience in off-campus professional settings, IS cannot gain the experience necessary to be knowledgeable of norms and practices in the Canadian workplace.

Despite many reports of positive on-campus work experiences and an appreciation for the ease with which IS are able to access required work permits, a key finding in our study was the fact that IS are ill-prepared to find meaningful off-campus employment in their field. IS were unhappy that they could not accumulate professional experience during their study because, unlike domestic students, they were not offered practicum or internship opportunities, and where such opportunities did exist, students regretted that they could not get hired because, "no one was helping me." As one participant remarked, "in terms of jobs, it's actually pretty tough. I haven't actually worked any job that was relevant to my field or what I would like to do eventually." The general consensus among focus group participants was that without establishing professional connections during their studies, IS would be sidelined in the job market and unable to find employment in their field after graduation.

### ***Perceptions of Prejudice and Discrimination in the Workforce***

The primary obstacle cited by IS in finding career-related off-campus work opportunities were the perception of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours of employers when faced with prospective IS employees. As detailed above, many participants spoke of how inadequate employment opportunities in their field during their program of studies hurt their chances of finding suitable work in Canada. However, this was not students' only perceived disadvantage. IS reporting feeling discriminated against because they believed potential employers are biased against hiring IS because employers lack experience working with IS and also do not appreciate the benefits of an intercultural workforce. Additionally, IS believed employers were biased against hiring IS because of their preconceived notions that IS would create an administrative burden due to paper work and dealing with government agencies. As one participant suggests, there is a feeling of confusion and skepticism in lack of opportunity that exists in Canada for IS:

I find that really strange [that we can't find adequate work], because Canada is underpopulated and...really multicultural, you know...[W]hy would you guys do that? You know...I don't understand...[w]hy would you restrict us? I just don't get it; it kind of conflicts for what they stand for.

Focus group participants frequently talked about perceiving discrimination against them on the basis of their status as IS, something that makes finding employment opportunities especially stressful. As one IS participant remarked,

We have that extra step, because...jobs are hard to get. Plus, you're not a resident. So, it's like that extra burden that is placed on us. So, we know we are like two times as likely to not get that job, because of that status that we probably have.

Indeed, there appeared to be a general consensus that it was unwise for IS to disclose their IS status to prospective employers. Reflecting on a previous interview, one participant remarked, "...I think at that time I was reluctant to tell [the interviewer] that I was an IS," while another added,

there is a fear there, definitely, because if there is anything that comes up, then okay, you go to them, and [say], 'I may need this from you to extend my stay' – I feel like automatically for them a red flag comes up, and then [they] think, 'what's the implications [for] our company?'

Still another focus group participant remarked,

...I never told anybody I was an IS. For me, it's just a feeling about how comfortable I am about revealing that information, because I feel that to some people you've talked to, once you tell them you're an IS, something happens.

IS attribute employer discrimination not to malicious intent, but to a general inexperience employers have hiring internationals. For instance, as one participant put it,

It's not like they are being racist or something – but it's actually easier for them to hire someone that is used to their [cultural] system; it's like they don't have to spend extra money or time training you...Thinking of it as a company...they don't have the obligation to hire us.

Comments such as these, in addition to feeling that IS do not receive adequate professional opportunities during their education speak to the need for added incentives and co-operative education programs that will encourage connections and contact between IS and industry partners. Further development of such programs will improve employers' experience working with IS while providing IS with the professional experience and language and cultural training they say they do not receive during their studies. IS in our sample also noted how this would bring added benefits to employers and workers as IS also have unique cultural skills such as language abilities and international and multicultural experiences that can benefit companies and organizations.

An additional concern IS had in assessing their ability to integrate into the Canadian workforce was that any career-related experience outside of Canada was discounted, despite being directly relevant to the job they were seeking. Again, IS felt as though their international background is viewed as a disadvantage. As one student comments,

I'm looking for a job here, maybe to be an intern at a clinical hospital, and I came to the offices at the university, and I told them I wanted to be an intern at a hospital...and they told me that I probably won't be eligible for that because I was an IS, and I told them that I already had...a lot of different courses in [home country] and I [interned at a hospital previously] ..., so I'm kind of used to... some procedures, you know, and they just told me that [I] can't do that because I am an IS. And I thought...they were trying to protect their own students.

Another participant agrees with this assessment, noting,

I had experience in [home country] and I could definitely apply [it] here. But, they just ignore it [or] don't count it. And it really puts me behind the others, because even if I had the same skills as the other students, I can't do the same thing as they do, you know?...I feel like employers don't recognize the degree that you have in another country, only the

Canadian ones...count. It doesn't make sense sometimes, like, I don't know why they don't count your previous experience if you already have it.

IS reported feeling that they were automatically shut out from desirable jobs, biasing some to think negatively about joining the workforce. IS recognized that the job market was also tough for Canadian students but stated that it was especially tough for IS and next to impossible for IS in humanities and social science programs. One comment in particular which is certainly unsettling was met with agreement from peers in the focus group:

...Canada boasts for being so multicultural, yet in a way they are hypocritical because you have a lot of immigrants coming, and we say, 'Yes we want you here,' but when [they] get here, it's, 'we don't want you to work in the positions you're qualified for,'...so, what's the point of claiming to be a multicultural country when you're still putting a negative spin on the immigrants that come?

The above barriers reported by IS when entering into the Canadian labour force also have potential to affect their status as future permanent residents through the Canadian Experience Class or the Federal Skilled Worker: PhD Stream programs. Under the Canadian Experience Class, IS that have completed at least two years of full-time post-secondary study are eligible to apply for permanent residency provided that they have achieved at least one year or equivalent of paid full-time work after they have graduated (CIC, 2014a). Under the program, IS' work experience cannot be obtained on a student visa, but typically through a post-graduation work permit or its equivalent. Similarly, through the PhD stream of the Federal Skilled Workers program, IS who have completed at least two years of their program, or those who have graduated within the last 12 months are eligible for permanent residency, provided they have at least one year of continuous full-time paid employment, or equal amounts in continuous part-time employment (CIC, 2014b). To be available for permanent residency through either of these programs IS need stable employment in their communities. IS participants in the present study reported experiencing several barriers that could impede their ability to find such work. Moreover, results from our survey (see Table 1) indicate a stark contrast in on- and off-campus employment. Ultimately, such factors suggest that initiatives at the university and government levels that facilitate connections between IS and off-campus employers during IS' study period can be an important step toward ensuring IS are able to secure adequate employment post-graduation to set them on the path toward permanent residency.

## **Conclusions**

International education is key to Canada's economic development strategy and prosperity as a nation because of its ability to foster intercultural learning, generate economic resources, and offer new sources of skilled labour to fill a projected shortage. Relative to other classes of immigrants, policy makers assume that IS are "ideal immigrants" to Canada because their experiences within the Canadian post-secondary education system is assumed to give them the essential skills needed to integrate successfully into the workforce upon graduation. IS, having adequately acculturated to Canadian society, are expected to make a particularly valuable contribution to the domestic labour market if they can be retained for the Canadian workforce after graduation.

Results from our case studies of IS' experiences at two Ontario institutions however, challenge this assumption. The findings from the present study echo past research suggesting that IS do not necessarily adjust effectively to their host countries, despite years of in-country education and training. If policy makers are to achieve their vision of making Canada a world leader in international education, they must work proactively with academic institutions and employers to offer better language and communication support services, professional training for IS akin to the co-operative education opportunities afforded to domestic students, work toward instilling a more general feeling of belonging between IS and their host communities, and target employers about the benefits of working with IS.

The present study is not without limitations. Primarily, our case selection and relatively limited sample size mean that findings are not to be generalized to reflect the wider IS experience in Canada (or necessarily, Ontario). Because we were interested in sampling widely from the IS population at each institution, our study did not control for factors like IS' program of study, age, or length of time in Canada. Future investigations might better target the successes and shortcoming of international education in Canada by exploring these factors separately. Nevertheless, we purposefully selected cases which were popular among IS in Canada's largest IS-receiving province. Moreover, we are confident that our methodology allowed us dive deeper into the IS experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Based on the present findings, we suggest a concerted effort by policy makers, university support staff, and private sector partners to increase IS' access to formalized, off-campus work opportunities in career-related fields. In so doing, IS will gain more opportunities to develop their professional language and communication proficiency (and in turn, their confidence), receive greater exposure to Canadian norms and values in the workplace, and have better prospects for labour market integration after graduation. Employers also stand to gain from such a program when IS are capable of bringing linguistic and cultural expertise to employers. Importantly, greater exposure to working with and hiring IS creates an important opportunity to overcome discriminatory behaviours and prejudicial attitudes that IS perceive to be inhibiting their prospective of finding meaningful work in Canada.

The results from the present study reflect that the lived experiences of IS do not necessarily align with key policy assumptions of Canada's *International Education Strategy*. Although IS perceive themselves to have "a leg up" over new immigrants coming to Canada, fundamental challenges in their transition into the labour market and into the broader Canadian society remain. Ultimately, if the recruitment and retention of IS and other skilled foreign workers is to generate the expected economic and intercultural learning opportunities, IS need to be better connected with Canadian industry partners.

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