IN THE SHADOW OF PREFERRED IMMIGRANTS: ACCOMPANYING PARTNERS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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A spouse or partner accompanies approximately 25% of international graduate students who study in Canada. Understanding the career development of the accompanying partners of international students is important for advancing knowledge and for mobilizing their potential for contributing to the Canadian labour market; given the fact that a large majority of accompanying partners are women, a focus on their career development is also important for addressing gender equity. In this article, we argue that it is critical for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to go beyond a focus on individual international students to also focus on their accompanying partners and to address the ongoing career development needs of these individuals. Specifically, we identify and discuss concerns related to professional qualifications and work experiences, barriers to employment, negative status changes, sacrificing for the family's future, and inadequacies in the support systems that are available to accompanying partners.

Un conjoint ou un partenaire accompagne environ 25 % des étudiants diplômés internationaux qui étudient au Canada. Il est important de comprendre le développement de carrière des partenaires d'accompagnement des étudiants internationaux afin de faire progresser les connaissances et mobiliser leur potentiel de contribution au marché du travail canadien. Étant donné qu'une grande majorité des partenaires accompagnant les étudiants sont des femmes, il est également important de mettre l'accent sur le développement de leur carrière pour assurer l'équité entre les sexes. Dans cet article, nous soutenons qu'il est essentiel pour les chercheurs, les praticiens et les décideurs d'aller au-delà de l'accent mis sur les étudiants internationaux pour se concentrer sur leurs partenaires et pour répondre aux besoins de développement de carrière de ces personnes. Plus précisément, nous identifions et discutons des préoccupations liées aux qualifications professionnelles et aux expériences de travail, des obstacles à l'emploi, des changements de statut négatifs, des sacrifices pour l'avenir de la famille et des insuffisances des systèmes de soutien disponibles pour les partenaires.

Immigration policy in Canada pertaining to international students has changed dramatically during the previous 20 years. Once considered to be temporary sojourners who study and then return to their home countries, there is growing attention paid to ways of recruiting and retaining international students as valuable sources of human capital (Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, 2012). Historically, international students were prohibited from working while studying in Canada. The trend has been to gradually shift the opportunities for international students to work while studying and more recently to gain experience working in Canada post-graduation. Such changes are linked to immigration strategies intended to support international students to gain work experience that potentially qualifies under the Canadian Employment Class for immigration (Arthur & Nunes, 2014). The former Immigration Minister of Canada, John McCallum stated, "International students are the best source of immigrants, in the sense that they're educated, they're young, they speak English or French, they know something of the country," he said. "So we should be doing everything we can do to court them" (CBC News, 2016). In essence, the view of international students as preferred immigrants positions them as a valuable source of human capital. International students are highly educated, they bring experience from their home countries, they have gained educational credentials through living and learning in Canada, and many have contacts for building trans-national business partnerships (Arthur, 2013; Zigarus & Law, 2006).

The emphasis on international students as commodities for the labour market has centred on individual students themselves. There appears to be an underlying assumption that all international students are young, independent, and autonomous in their decision-making (Doyle, Loveridge, & Faamanatu-Eteuati, 2016). This assumption is rapidly becoming outdated, particularly for older international students who are studying in graduate programs. Approximately 25% of international graduate students studying in Canada, are accompanied by their spouse (Campbell & Prins, 2016). In this discussion, we define accompanying partners as the married or common-law partners of international students, who travel to and live in Canada, primarily because of the international student's education, but are not themselves engaged in academic studies. Despite the growing attention to the recruitment and experiences of international students to Canada, little is known about the lived experience of their partners, primarily women, who accompany international students to their country of education (Doyle et al., 2016; Martens & Grant, 2008). Moreover, an overwhelming majority of accompanying partners are well-educated women with valuable work experience from their countries of origin (Kim, 2012; Teshome, & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Therefore, understanding accompanying spouses' career development is important for reasons beyond advancing knowledge; it is important from the stand-point of recognizing and mobilizing the excellent potential of this population for contributing to the Canadian labour market, and from the stand-point of gender equity.

LOOKING BEYOND THE INITIAL ADJUSTMENT TO CANADA

The sparse literature on accompanying partners of international students has primarily focused on their initial adjustment and adaptation to living in another country (Kim, 2012; Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon Ko, & Lu, 2011; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). We have advocated for a focus on the career development of women accompanying partners as their roles have been minimized and silenced in the discourse about international education and immigration (Cui, Arthur, & Domene, 2017). It is essential to consider that career decisions are not only made by individuals, but are made within the family context (Domene et al., 2012; Evans, 2012). What has been neglected in the international student literature are the family issues and experiences that are relevant for (a) the decision to study internationally, (b) the decision to pursue work experience post-graduation in Canada, and (c) plans for permanent immigration to Canada. As such, the experiences of accompanying partners have been largely ignored. This is particularly problematic because the partners of international students are often caught between gaps in educational, employment and immigration policies and systems, and may end up in precarious working and living situations. To reframe the quote above, if we are going to do everything we can to attract international students to Canada as permanent immigrants, consideration should also be given to the career plans, employment potential, and support needs of their accompanying partners.

THE GENDERED NATURE OF CAREER EXPERIENCES

In our research, involving interviews with 60 heterosexual women accompanying partners recruited through our respective universities, preliminary analysis has suggested five trends related to the gendered nature of their career experiences. First of all, there was a trend related to 'professional qualifications and work experience'. Similar to previous research (e.g., Kim, 2012; Teshome, & Osei-Kofi, 2012), we found the majority of accompanying partners to be highly educated, with one or more degrees, who brought valuable work experience and credentials from their countries of origin. Nonetheless, these women also reported experiencing substantial difficulty with having their qualifications and experiences recognized in Canada.

'Barriers to employment' emerged as a second important trend. Conditions in Canada were often unfavorable for these accompanying partners to advance their employment and career development. Similar to other groups of newcomers (Arthur, 2015; Chen, 2005), many of our participants experi-

enced barriers for pursuing their occupations, both in their selected field, and at the level they had obtained in their home countries. Language competency and proficiency in English was consistently reported as a barrier. Unfortunately, the story of limited employment options is all too familiar, when educated newcomers are limited to low-skilled, low-pay, gender-stereotyped work. The choice for many accompanying partners who want to work was to remain unemployed or to compromise and accept 'survivor' jobs to gain Canadian experience, at the expense of furthering their professional careers. However, the extent to which such jobs afford a laddering up experience or represent a long-term career barrier requires further examination. The hours working in survivor jobs, time to improve language fluency, and time for parenting and household activities may leave many women at risk for longer-term underemployment. In contrast, the few accompanying partners who were able to secure work within their occupational field reported a positive sense of career success and learning about the workplace in Canada. Their resourcefulness for overcoming barriers is similar to previous research that has noted the more positive aspects of transitioning for accompanying partners (Campbell & Prins, 2016).

Third, the trend of 'negative status changes' also became apparent. While international students are furthering their education and prospects for future employment by coming to Canada, many accompanying partners have their careers in a holding pattern; they have left the labour market in their country of origin and are neither enrolled in higher education to advance their own future career opportunities, nor employed in positions commensurate with their qualifications and experiences. Consequently, many of the interviewees felt their status shifted from the role of working professional, to a secondary status as 'partners of' an international student. In other words, at the same time as studying in Canada centred on the 'upskilling' of international students, accompanying partners reported the experience of 'downskilling' and lack of status.

Fourth, was the trend of 'sacrifice for the family's future'. Several of the women noted that they chose to sacrifice their own career advancement to support their spouses/partners. The adoption of traditional gender roles, including the expectation/desire to support their student spouses, was described as investing in the longer-term benefits for the family. Some accompanying partners may intentionally pursue full-time parenting as their primary life role and, consequently, view the acts of supporting their spouse's education and taking care of their children as an extension of their career plans. Yet, many of the women we interviewed also reported role disruption, as they were positioned by default, as having to take primary responsibility for child-rearing, seeking new resources for the family, and managing households (Zhang, Smith, Swisher, Fu, & Fogarty, 2011). This role disruption left little time, energy, or opportunities to pursue interests outside the home. Many international students find the demands of international studies to be time-intensive, leaving little time for them to spend with family or pursue extracurricular activities (Arthur, 2016). This reality seemed to add role strain for the accompanying partners, who were then left, behind the scenes, to figure out the logistics of life in Canada.

Fifth, there was a trend related to 'inadequate support systems.' There was considerable variation in the knowledge that women held regarding available support on campus or in the larger community. Although the women we interviewed were articulate about the kinds of supports that would help to ease their transition experience and enable their career plans, they often lacked information or access to a network to help them obtain suitable resources. This situation was exacerbated by university policies that focused specifically on providing support services only for enrolled students. Most institutions of higher education that recruit international students have support programming in place, particularly to address the initial stage of transition to life in Canada and a new educational institution. International students have the anchor of attending educational systems where they can quickly meet other people and have access to a myriad of academic and support services. However, because their spouses/partners are not enrolled at the educational institution, they are often not included in institutional programming and funding is lacking to provide such outreach services. This lack of access to services usually includes access to campus-based career and employment services. It is also prudent to remember that labour market information and job search processes vary considerably across country and cultural contexts. Access to current information about local labour market conditions and culturally-appropriate job seeking skills are key resources when large discrepancies exists between the norms and practices of various countries of origin, in comparison to the Canadian context (Arthur, 2017). Moreover, although campus-based career development practitioners may have difficulties providing services to individuals seeking to work internationally, they are certainly qualified to assist accompanying partners who are attempting to enter the Canadian labour market.

CONCLUSION

Canada is one of many countries in competition for market share of international students. It is timely to consider the needs of this diverse population and their family members. There is a growing evidence base regarding the adjustment and acculturation experiences of accompanying partners, but less information regarding their career development. There are strong career connections found between people's interests and capacity for navigating educational, employment, and immigration systems. However, it appears that those connections are underexplored to better understand the realities faced by international students and their families. Those experiences are going to be varied, given the heterogeneity

of these populations, the cultural similarities and differences, and the extent to which issues of gender, race, and social class intersect in the transition experiences of a new life in Canada (Cui et al., 2017).

Ironically, in our research we found that there were many gatekeepers for accessing interviews with accompanying partners. These included various administrators and departments within student services and campus housing, and we had to rely on international students passing along recruitment information to their spouses/partners. If we found it challenging to reach out to accompanying partners, we are left with many questions about how difficult it might be for them to connect with other systems of service and support. Although some campuses are considering ways to be more 'family friendly' to international students and their family members, there is not a consistent model of service provision in Canada (Domene, 2016). Given the lack of programming for accompanying partners that exist on campus and in the community, it seems that many accompanying partners are at risk of falling between the cracks of education, employment, and immigration services. If we extend the notion that we should be 'courting' international students to stay in Canada, the 'courting' needs to extend to their accompanying partners in more substantive and intentional ways.

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