Finding and Securing Employment: Experiences of Alumni International Students in Canada

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Many international student alumni experience barriers as they transition from school to work. This research examines the university-to-work transitions of 19 international student alumni who attended university in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Our research looks at the constant and varied challenges alumni face at two levels— institutional and individual—including discrimination based on race and immigrant status, accent and language barriers, social isolation, job insecurity, and underemployment, resulting in poor mental health. To secure stable employment commensurate with their skills and training, international students activate their personal and social networks.

INTRODUCTION

Many international student alumni experience barriers as they transition from school to work in Canada. This transition is difficult, uneven, and not always successful. Economic, social and cultural challenges often mark the process of finding and securing employment. Many are confronted with daily challenges related to the high cost of living (food and housing), financial setbacks such as job loss and income reduction, and limited social connections. These challenges are further compounded by discrimination, language difficulties, mental and physical health strains, job insecurity, and precarious immigration status (CBIE, 2023; El Masri and Khan, 2022).

Between 2023 to 2024, a team of researchers from York University and Toronto Metropolitan University undertook a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded project to examine the employment barriers alumni face at two levels— individual and institutional—and the strategies they employ in seeking employment in Ontario. Specifically, we examined four research questions: a) what are the challenges facing international student alumni seeking full-time employment post-graduation?; b) what institutional supports (universities, employers, and agencies) are available?; c) what individual strategies do individuals employ in seeking employment?; and d) what role do social connections (friends, family, professors, employers, coworkers, community agencies) play in helping international students secure permanent employment? Our findings reveal the importance of building social connections and collaborative efforts between post-secondary institutions, employers, and settlement agencies in identifying barriers and helping international students find full-time employment after graduation.

METHODS

We recruited international student alumni who graduated within 3 to 5 years prior via snowball sampling and the university's alumni network. The inclusion criterion (graduation time frame) was established to ensure that alumni can meaningfully reflect on challenges and successes they face in their employment experiences and career trajectories.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 19 international student alumni. Participants were diverse in gender, age, and country of birth. The majority are aged 25 to 29. Participants were mainly from East Asia (5), South Asia (4), Europe (3), South America (2), Africa (2), North America (2), and the Caribbean (1). Participants arrived between 2012 and 2016 and lived in Toronto upon arrival. Academically, these participants came from a mix of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and BHASE (Business, Humanities, Health, Arts, Social Science, and Education) backgrounds. Participants graduated between 2018 and 2022. At the time of the interview, 17 of the participants were employed. Moreover, the legal status of the group varied, including: 1 citizen, 10 permanent residents, and 4 post-graduation work permits.

Limited Institutional Support from Educators and Employers

International student alumni stated that the advice and information they received from university career centres was basic and, for the most part, already available from online resources. As one participant said, "I think the advice [staff] had given me was stuff that I already found from googling. I said I already knew that stuff. I thought they would have given me more, but they didn't" (Mary, arrived in 2016 from the British Virgin Islands, age 25-29, BHASE alumni). Limited job search assistance from the university leaves participants feeling unprepared and unsupported. Participants resort to individual strategies (e.g., online job board applications, job opportunities through word of mouth) and their social connections to navigate the challenges of transitioning from school to work.

Managing Employment and Health Challenges

International student alumni experience mental and physical health decline due to the challenges of finding full-time employment in their field."Whenever people would ask the question of 'so how's the job search going?', my heart would sink because the answer was always the same. It got to a point where I would limit social interaction because I wanted to run away from that question...I think there's a lot of stigma for a lot of international students because they all came here expecting to find jobs" (Mark, arrived in 2014 from Kenya, age 25-29, BHASE alumni).

Unemployment and underemployment can lead to a lack of funds for groceries, housing costs, and other living expenses. These financial challenges, coupled with other health and social issues, lead to feelings of fear, stress, and uncertainty, which have a negative impact on the mental and physical well-being of participants.

Managing Discrimination

International student alumni face discrimination and prejudice. Participants stress they face discrimination against their temporary legal status, nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, age, language skills, and accents when looking for employment and when on the job. For example, participants with temporary legal status are ineligible for certain employment opportunities, which makes it difficult to find permanent employment without permanent residence (PR) (Fang et al., 2022). Periwinkle explains that "the relations between Russia and the West at that point were pretty bad", which "created a sort of the bias against me as I was looking for positions, especially in the private sector" (arrived in 2016 from Russia, age 25-29, BHASE alumni).

Other participants recounted encounters of accent and language discrimination. For example, Peter, an online part-time tutor, talked about how his clients became frustrated with his English skills, often commenting, "I don't understand what you mean" (arrived in 2014 from China, age 25-29, BHASE alumni). These comments leave participants feeling discouraged about their language skills and anxious about their long-term career prospects.

Overcoming Challenges through Social Connections

Even though alumni international students often lack family members or friends upon arrival in Canada, their families "from afar" provide ongoing instrumental, emotional, and financial support. For example, Alex (arrived in 2015 from Pakistan, age 25-29, STEM alumni) received full financial assistance from his parents, enabling him to meet the high tuition fees facing international students who are ineligible for domestic financial aid (e.g., Ontario Student Assistance Program). Without family and friends in Canada, international students work extremely hard to strengthen their social connections, which offer emotional support and local information on how to access housing, jobs, emergency aid, health, and legal services.

International students also share resources among themselves, such as money, clothes, or household goods, and provide help with childcare or temporary housing (Bottrell, 2009; Mandell et al., 2022). Local social connections may enhance employment opportunities when participants seek career advice from professors, exchange job search strategies with peers, build connections on social media platforms, and improve their job-seeking skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research challenges the neoliberal idea that settlement and integration is an "individual affair" by calling attention to the critical role of different social institutions in facilitating pathways to permanent residency and readiness to enter the Canadian job market (Preston, Shields, and Akbar, 2022). Successful settlement and integration "takes a village"; universities, government, employers, friends, family, coworkers, and community members must work together to promote international student success (Radiamoda et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

We provide insights into the lived experiences of international student alumni, highlighting the role of individual and institutional supports in helping alumni overcome barriers in securing employment after graduation. We asked participants for recommendations on how to improve the experiences of international students seeking employment after graduation. For universities, our participants recommended the following: improving the career centers by offering accessible locations; hiring multi-lingual staff to assist with various questions related to job search; offering internships or job placement opportunities; extending networking events with business and community experts; and increasing access to mental and physical services on campus since international students do not qualify for provincially funded health services.

For employers, participants recommended: promoting equitable hiring practices (e.g., do not use legal status to restrict and disqualify international students from employment opportunities); reassessing the requirement for Canadian work experience; offering bias training in the workplace; introducing mentorship programs where senior employees guide junior employees through early stages of their career; and providing mental health support in the workplace.

Participants offered suggestions for incoming international students, including: building social connections by joining clubs on campus, attending social events, and doing a semester abroad; participating in community activities to enhance social networking; beginning job searches within their field of study at least one year before graduation; finding summer jobs to gain Canadian work experience; and prioritizing physical and mental well-being.

Given the importance of international students to the growth and strength of Canadian society, there is a need for a robust collaborative effort among various institutions, including universities, employers, and settlement agencies, to ensure that international students receive meaningful support during their transitions from university to work.

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