International students and career development: Human capital in the global skills race

Nancy Arthur

Views of international students have shifted from considering them as temporary learners seeking international education to positioning them as a valuable source of human capital. These views form a context from which to consider international students' career development needs while living and learning in higher educational settings and in considering their career options post-graduation. Influences on international students' career decision-making to stay in the destination country are discussed. Targeted areas for career services are outlined to support the transition from education to employment in the destination country and for international students returning to their home countries.

● ●

Introduction

There is growing interest by policy-makers across the education, employment, and immigration sectors about the role of international students in academic programs and in the labour market. Views of international students vary between countries, ranging from considering them as temporary learners who seek an educational experience outside of their home country, limiting post-graduation immigration, to positioning them as a highly skilled source of human capital and desirable immigrants for destination countries (Douglass and Edelstein, 2009; Zigarus and Law, 2006). These various perspectives underpin the importance of considering international students' career development needs while living and learning in higher educational settings and preparing them for employment options post-graduation.

Historically, it was assumed, due to immigration policies, that international students were temporary sojourners who would return to their home countries following the completion of their academic programs in higher education (Pedersen, 1991). However, immigration policies in many countries have changed in recognition of the relatively untapped pool of human capital in the international student population (Arthur and Nunes, in press; Gribble and Blackmore, 2012). International students, and particularly graduate students, are highly educated people. They bring a wealth of experience from their home countries and cultures, their academic credentials earned in the destination country, and contacts for future international business partnerships. As a result, they have expertise for the labour market to meet local needs, and expertise to position companies for serving diverse consumer markets both nationally and internationally. Consequently, international students have increased opportunities to focus their longer-term career planning on gaining employment experience in some destination countries, taking that expertise home, mobility between countries, or pursuing employment and immigration in the destination country.

The expanding options for international students have major implications for their career planning and decision-making, and for campus support services. Available research suggests there are barriers in the transition process from education to employment that need to be addressed at the levels of policy, institutional services, employers, and the preparation of international students (Gribble and Blackmore, 2012; Nunes and Arthur, 2012; Popadiuk and Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, and Cavazos, 2011). The discussion in this article will frame key influences

on international students' career decision-making with recommendations for career services to foster employment and social integration. Readers are invited to consider how international students' career decisions are inextricably bound to their sense of community, place, and relationships between home and destination countries.

Trends for International Student Mobility

The numbers of international students worldwide are expected to increase, as source countries pursue ways to be competitive in the global market, and as institutions of higher education expand their internationalisation mandates (Bohm, Davis, Meares, and Pearce, 2002). There has been more than a fourfold increase in the numbers of international students in the past four decades, increasing from an estimated 0.8 million in 1975 to 3.7 million in 2009 (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2011). China and India are the top two source countries for international students (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009). Although the top country destinations preferred by international students are the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France and Australia (UNESCO, 2009), Malaysia, Singapore, and China are emerging destinations, illustrating growth in mobility between countries in Asia.

There has been surprisingly little attention paid to the career development needs of international students, including key influences on their career decisions, and the factors that help them to persist in attaining their career goals (Reynolds and Constantine, 2007; Singaravelu, White, and Bringaze, 2005). The decision to study in another country is usually motivated by both *push* and *pull* factors (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) related to international students' career trajectories. Conditions in the home country are theorized to push international students towards other countries, including lack of local academic and employment opportunities, pressure from families, perceived value of international education, and difficult political or social conditions (Arthur, 2004). The pull factors for

studying in another country pivot around perceived advantages such as the quality of education, lifestyle considerations such as safety and standard of living, or seeking to expand knowledge and skills with foreign languages, applications of technology, business, and professional practices (Gu, Schweisfurthb and Daya, 2010).

Although these push and pull influences are often portrayed as discrete entities between countries, they are connected by three common factors, (a) many international students are motivated to enhance their career opportunities (Brooks, Waters, and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012), (b) relationships in both home and host cultures have an integral role in supporting the career decisions of international students (Popadiuk and Arthur, 2013), and (c) ongoing evaluations are made by international students regarding opportunities in both home and destination countries (Arthur and Flynn, 2011). Considering the interplay between these factors is essential for understanding international students' initial reasons for studying in another country and for their decision-making as they complete their academic studies and consider their options for employment. Consequently, the career planning and decision-making of international students must be considered within their worldview and their sense of priorities. For example, many models of decision-making are based on assumptions of autonomy and independence. Students from more collectivistic cultures may have a stronger connection to values that honour community and family wishes and their decision-making may be based on different priorities than students from more individualistic cultures (Arthur and Popadiuk, 2010).

From a broader macro view, changes in the global economy and competition for human capital have positioned international students as a key commodity in the higher education market and in the employment market (Adnett, 2010; Douglas and Edelstein, 2009). International students bring a major revenue stream to institutions of higher education through differential tuition fees. The economic investment made by international students in foreign tuition fees, along with spending in the local community, has fueled competition between countries to increase the inflow of international students.

Some governments of destination countries are looking at the longer-term economic benefits of recruiting international students to the employment market (Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, 2012), primarily due to labour market demands. A number of country examples illustrate how immigration policies have changed to better accommodate international students (e.g., Arthur and Nunes, in press; Gribble and Blackmore, 2012). However, readers are cautioned that there are large variations in immigration policies between destination countries. Immigration policies can change suddenly due to economic and/or political conditions, and readers are advised to locate the most recent regulations of specific countries regarding student visas and employment permits post-graduation. For example, several countries incorporated under the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have revised their policies directed at working visas and temporary residence procedures for international students and graduates (CERI, 2011). Time studying or working in the destination country is taken into consideration through the immigration regulations and rating systems of countries such as Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, and Norway (CERI, 2011). In the United States, shifting immigration policies has resulted in a more complicated screening process for international student visa applications (Douglass and Edelstein, 2009) and post-graduation visas are classified in relation to practical training. The economic downturn in countries, such as the United States, impacts the employment prospects for international students. Economic conditions may also lead to restrictions about employers hiring international students, such as is currently evident in immigration policies in the UK, while also increasing the competition for available jobs (Gribble and Blackmore, 2012). Although immigration policies are country specific, these examples show how international student recruitment and retention policies are connected to systems of higher education, employment, and the labour market conditions of destination countries.

Presumably, in comparison to other immigrants, international students may be preferred by employers because they have gained credentials and experience in the local culture (Hawthorne, 2006). However,

attitudes by employers and their hiring practices do not always reflect an appreciation for the benefits of international experience. Research with international students has reported their impressions from job search and interviews with employers, suggesting that the experience they bring from their home countries is devalued, and employers may be primarily interested in work experience gained in the local context (Nunes and Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). International students are in a disadvantaged position if employers favour hiring from the pool of local applicants. Such bias has been documented regarding the employment transitions of the general immigrant population. Employer attitudes such as ethnocentrism, anti-immigrant biases, and lack of recognition of foreign experience and credentials have been cited as systemic barriers for employment integration (Bimrose and McNair, 2011; Chen, 2010).

The extent to which international students are welcomed into employment systems is connected to prevailing social discourse about the role of immigrant workers in local contexts. If positive sentiments are maintained through seeing the benefits of hiring people with local and foreign experience, international students are likely to be welcomed in local communities. However, when prevailing attitudes are that immigrants take jobs away from local people, particularly during times of economic downswing, international students may not be welcomed by employers or by local communities (Chen, 2010). Local students may also view international students as potential competitors for the job market, which may result in overt discrimination or more subtle forms of social avoidance. The perceived quality of relationships in the host country, including faculty, local students, and employers, can have a profound influence on academic success and on international students' motivation and success in transitioning to employment post-graduation (Popadiuk and Arthur, 2013).

Implications for Career Services

Policies that link international students to the labour market of the destination country need to be matched with programs and services to support international

student success for gaining employment in their chosen field. It should not be assumed that the labour market is open to them, and international students need adequate preparation for formally and informally connecting to employment. There are four key areas that are important directions for career services in higher education, directed towards international students: (a) knowledge about the labour market, (b) programs for scaffolding employment experience, (c) mentoring, and, (d) practice for managing the cultural norms for job-seeking. Although these are listed as discrete topics, they are often intertwined in terms of international student needs to support their career development.

Knowledge of the labour market in local, national, and international contexts can help international students to make informed decisions about where they want to focus their job search post-graduation. Shifting economies within countries may mean that international students require labour market information to understand local opportunities and/or be prepared to mobilize to pursue opportunities in other locations. Prior to graduation, one of the key issues raised by international students is overcoming barriers about gaining access to employment experience. They have identified the importance of local work experience and mentorship as avenues for their success (Nunes and Arthur, 2013; Popadiuk and Arthur, 2013). Gaining access to the labour market may be due to lack of information, or it may be also due to lack of available opportunities. While enrolled in higher education, international students need to gain experience, through school-industry partnerships such as co-op programs, summer or part-time employment, volunteer experience, or roles with professional associations. Such experiences are valuable for international students to apply their academic skills, to learn more about the norms and expectations of the workplace and their selected fields, and to cultivate references for future employment. Faculty members play a pivotal role in helping international students to make connections for employment and to mentor them about ways to position their professional experience. Other sources of mentorship include international student graduates who are further along in the transition from education to employment, who can inspire others to be successful and share tips

about how they managed to navigate local employment systems.

One of the challenges that many international students face is becoming familiar with both the formal and informal protocols of job search strategies, interviews, and norms for workplace interactions. Education about job placement and opportunities to practice job search skills have been identified as priorities by international students (Behrens, 2009; Shen and Herr, 2004). There is considerable variation between and within countries about how employment is obtained, e.g., academic achievement, family loyalty and kinship networks often bound by social class, employment agents, etc. Depending upon the degree of cultural differences between international students' home and host cultures, behavior expected for job search, interview protocols, and presentation of qualifications may be nuanced in ways that are difficult for international students to follow, without coaching about cultural norms (Behrens, 2009; Sangganianavanich et al., 2011). The onus continues to be placed on international students to be workplace ready, in term of understanding expectations and assimilating to local customs and norms for behavior. Perhaps one of the most neglected areas in the interface between career services in higher education and the labour market is the education of employers about this relatively untapped pool of skilled labour. International students can be prepared for seeking employment, but employers need to be receptive to hiring them.

Career Preparation for Returning Home

The emphasis of this discussion has been on the retention of international students in the destination country. Even though many international students would like to pursue employment and permanent immigration, the reality is that most international students return to their home countries (Musumba, Jin, and Mjelde, 2011; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Career services on campuses need to be responsive to the unique needs of international services in preparing for the re-entry home (Leung, 2007). It is important to remember that the re-entry process begins while in the destination country during the later stages of

completing an academic program and preparing to enter the labour market in the home country. Students may not recognise the need to prepare for returning home, out of their sense of familiarity and prior life experiences. However, the literature on re-entry transitions suggests that most people underestimate the degree of reverse culture shock that they will experience (Christofi and Thompson, 2007; Gaw, 2000), primarily due to the degree of change at home, and often a lack of recognition about how much the individual has changed through exposure to new cultural norms and lifestyles. Information can be distributed to international students through ongoing student orientation, re-entry workshops where students can discuss and learn from each other, or through electronic bulletins. The main purpose of career services targeted towards re-entry is to help international students prepare for leaving the destination culture and prepare for life at home. Such services need to have as their primary focus support for international students to document how their experiences while studying as an international student can transfer to marketable skills. In other words, re-entry programming needs to focus on helping international students to increase their human capital potential and employment integration in their home countries.

Ideally, the educational experiences of living and learning in another country positions international students favourably upon returning home (Campbell, 2010). However, conditions in the home country can change dramatically during the time that individual studies abroad, and fluctuating labour markets can result in more or fewer employment opportunities. It is important that international students maintain their employment contacts and receive support to develop new contacts with employers in their home countries. For example, some institutions in higher education have devoted resources to career specialists dedicated to supporting international students with their job search in the primary source countries. The liaison between educational institutions and employers helps to link international students with employers. In turn, there are contacts, resources, and referrals that favourably position the educational institution for future networking and projects. Perhaps one of the strongest marketing points that can be leveraged

is seamless student support from the point of inquiry about international education to departure and integration into employment.

Conclusion

Retaining international students in destination countries is a strategic immigration strategy in terms of recruiting talent and adding to the diversity of the available labour pool of highly skilled workers. However, the career decisions made by international students extend beyond perceived employment opportunities to factors such as safety and security in the destination country, lifestyle options, gender expectations, affordability, the ease of making new relationships, and the sense of belonging in the local community. The decision to stay in the destination country can disrupt extended family connections and international students need to build a sense of community and home in the new country. Beyond immediate employment opportunities, the perceived quality of life is fundamental for weighing options post-graduation. Securing employment in their chosen academic field is a key for both economic and social integration. However, most international students will continue to evaluate their situation through comparisons of opportunities between home and destination countries. That evaluation extends beyond securing employment to the sense of community and connection within the workplace and in the local community. The career decisions of international students are not simply a choice of securing employment in one country over another. Rather, the quality of lifestyle, sense of place, and relationship connections influence their initial decisions post-graduation and their decisions about career pathways for the future. The discussion about international students needs to extend beyond recruitment of human capital to considering how to support their social and workplace integration post-graduation.

References

Adnett, N. (2010) The Growth of International Students and Economic Development: Friends or Foes?, in *Journal of Education Policy*, 25, 625-637.

Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy. (2012) *International Education: A Key Driver Of Canada's Prosperity*. Ottawa, ON: Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. http://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/strategy-strategie/index.aspx?view=d (accessed 15 January 2013).

Arthur, N. (2004) *Counselling International students: Clients from Around the World*, New York, NY: Springer.

Arthur, N. (2007) Career Planning and Decision-Making Needs of International Students, in Pope, M. & Singaravelu, H. (eds.) *A Handbook for Counselling International Students in the United States,* Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Arthur, N., and Flynn, S. (2011) Career Development Influences of International Students Who Pursue Permanent Immigration To Canada, in *International Journal of Education and Vocational Guidance*, 11, 221-237.

Arthur, N., and Nunes, S. (in press) Should I Stay or Should I Go Home? Career Guidance with International Students, in Arulmani, G., Bakshi, A., Leong, F., and Watts, T. (eds.) *Handbook of Career Development: International Perspectives*, New York: Springer.

Arthur, N., and Popadiuk, N. (2010) A Cultural Formulation Approach to Counseling International Students, in *Journal of Career Development,* 37, 423-440.

Australian Council for Private Education and Training (2009). T*he Australian Education Sector and the Economic Contribution of International Students.* Australia: Access Economics Pty Limited. http://globalhighered.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/theeconomiccontributionofinternationalstudents-2461.pdf (accessed 9 September, 2010).

Behrens, D. (2009) Interview Practice U.S. Style: A Workshop for International Students, in *Journal of Employment Counselling*, 46, 182-184.

Bimrose, J., and McNair, S. (2011) Career Support for Migrants: Transformation or Adaptation, in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 78, 321-392.

Bohm, A., Davis, D., Meares, D., and Pearce, D. (2002) *Global Student Mobility 2025: Forecasts of the Global Demand for International Higher Education*, Sydney, NSW: IDP Education Australia.

Brooks, R., Waters, J., and Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2012) International Education and the Employability of UK Students, in *British Educational Research Journal*, 38, 281-298.

Campbell, A. (2010) Developing Generic Skills and Attributes of International Students: The (Ir)Relevance of the Australian University Experience, in *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 32, 487-497.

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. (2011) *Education at a Glance 2011: Highlights*. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2011_eag_highlights-2011-en (accessed 1 November, 2012).

Chen, C. (2008) Career Guidance with Immigrants, in Athanasou, J. and Van Esbroeck, R. (eds.) *International Handbook of Career Guidance*, New York, NY: Springer.

Christofi, V. and Thompson, C. L. (2007) You Cannot Go Home Again: A Phenomenological Investigation of Returning to the Sojourn Country after Studying Abroad, in *Journal of Counseling & Development,* 85, 53–63.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). (2008) *Canadian Experience Class.* http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/cec/index.asp (accessed 1 November, 2012).

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) *Estimating the Value to the UK of Education Exports*. http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/e/11-980-estimating-value-of-education-exports.pdf (accessed 1 November, 2012).

Douglass, J. A., and Edelstein, R. (2009) *The Global Competition for Talent: The Rapidly Changing Market for International Students and the Need for a Strategic Approach in the US*. (Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.8.09), University of California, Center for

Higher Studies in Education. http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qw462x1 (accessed 9 March 2011).

Gaw, K. F. (2000) Reverse Culture Shock in Students Returning from Overseas, in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24, 83-104.

Gribble, C., and Blackmore, J. (2012) Re-Positioning Australia's International Education in Global Knowledge Economies: Implications of Shifts in Skilled Migration Policies for Universities, in *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 34, 341-354.

Gu, Q., Schweisfurthb, M., and Daya, C. (2010) Learning and Growing in a 'Foreign' Context: Intercultural Experiences of International Students, in *British Association for International and Comparative Education*, 40, 7-23.

Hawthorne, L. (2006) Labour Market Outcomes for Migrant Professionals: Canada and Australia Compared- Executive Summary. http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/research/2006-canada-australia.asp. (accessed 9 March 2011).

Johnson, L., and Sandhu, D.S. (2007) Isolation, Adjustment, and Acculturation Issues of International Students: Intervention Strategies for Counselors, in Singaravelu, H. and Pope, M., *A Handbook for Counseling International Students in the United States*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Institute of International Education. (2012) *Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange*. http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors (accessed 23 March 2013).

Leung, S.A. (2007) Returning Home and Issues Related to Reverse Culture Shock, in Singaravelu, H. and Pope, M. (eds.), *A Handbook for Counseling International Students in the United States*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Masumba, M., Jin, Y., and Mjelde, J. (2011) Factors Influencing Career Location Preferences of International Graduate Students in the United States, in *Education Economics*, 19, 501-517.

Mazzarol, T., and Soutar, G. N. (2002) "Push-Pull" Factors Influencing International Student Destination Choice, in *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 16, 82-90.

Moores, L., and Popadiuk, N. E. (2011) Positive Aspects of International Student Transitions: A Qualitative Inquiry, in J*ournal of College Student Development*, 52, 291-306.

Nunes, S., and Arthur, N. (2013) International Students' Experiences of Integrating Into the Workforce, in *Journal of Employment Counseling,* 50, 34-45.

Pedersen, P. (1991) Counseling International Students, in *The Counseling Psychologist,* 19, 10-58.

Popadiuk, N., and Arthur, N. (2004) Counselling International Students in Canada, in *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling,* 26, 125-145.

Popadiuk, N., and Arthur, N. (2013) Key Relationships for International Student University-to-Work Transitions, in *Journal of Career Development*. Published online before print March 22, 2013.

Reynolds, A., and Constantine, M. (2007) Cultural Adjustment Difficulties and Career Development of International College Students, in *Journal of Career Assessment,* 15, 338-350.

Sangganjanavanich, V. F., Lenz, A. S. and Cavazos, J. (2011) International Students' Employment Search in the United States: A Phenomenological Study, in J*ournal of Employment Counseling*, 48, 17–26.

Shen, Y., and Herr, E. L. (2004) Career Placement Concerns of International Graduate Students: A Qualitative Study, in *Journal of Career Development,* 31, 15-29.

Singaravelu, H., White, L., and Bringaze, T. (2005) Factors Influencing International Students' Career Choice: A Comparative Study, in *Journal of Career Development,* 32, 46-59.

Spencer-Rodgers, J. (2000) The Vocational Situation and Country of Orientation of International Students, in *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development,* 28, 32-49.

UNESCO. (2009) Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001831/183168e.pdf

(accessed 9 March 2011).

Ziguras, C., & Law, S. (2006) Recruiting International Students as Skilled Immigrants: The Global 'Skills Race' as Viewed from Australia and Malaysia. *Globalisation, Societies, and Education*, 4, 59-76.

For correspondence

Nancy Arthur,
Professor and Canada Research Chair in Professional Education,
Educational Studies in Counselling Psychology,
Faculty of Education,
University of Calgary

narthur@ucalgary.ca