

Career development for international students in North America

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Abstract

The proportion of international students studying in post-secondary institutions in the United States and Canada is growing. These students are facing various career development issues that are unique to the population and may contribute to employment difficulties. This article focuses on international students' career issues from three aspects: cultural barriers, help-seeking barriers, and visa restrictions. Career counselling interventions are reviewed and discussed from a theoretical perspective, including lifecareer theory and social cognitive career theory. The goal of this paper is to add to the literature on career counselling interventions for international students who experience specific career issues.

Keywords: career development; international students; higher education; career theory; career counselling

Career development for international students in North America

The number of international students is growing and now represents a large proportion of students in colleges and universities. Approximately 4.5 million students are studying outside of their country of citizenship (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). The population of international students in the United States increased substantially over the last three decades, with an annual growth of 7% (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016), while the proportion in Canada tripled over the last decade, representing more than half of the total growth in students in post-secondary programmes (Statistics Canada, 2020). Across Europe, the estimated number of international students pursuing tertiary education in 2020 exceeded 1.46 million, with the highest proportion of international students reported in Germany, followed by France and the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2022). The United Kingdom alone has attracted over 500,000 students to leave their home

countries and commence their study abroad (OECD, 2022). In Canada, over half of all international students are from China (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2020). Similarly, China is also the most common country of origin amongst all international students across Europe, followed by India (Eurostat, 2022). The main fields of interest for international students are business and management (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2020). The USA Department of Education estimated the proportion of international students represented 3% of all conferred bachelor's degrees, 12% of master's degrees, and 25% of doctoral degrees (Crockett & Hays, 2011).

The reason why international students choose to study abroad is mainly due to the higher quality of education and better career opportunities. Students believe that education in North America could provide them with better knowledge in their learning field, a better social network, better mentorship, and better job opportunities (Han *et al.*, 2015). The study also showed that graduates who have experience learning abroad during their university studies are more likely to be employed after graduation, compared to peers who stay in their home country (Di Pietro, 2015) this paper investigates the extent to which participation in study abroad programs during university studies impacts subsequent employment likelihood. To address the problem of endogeneity related to participation in study abroad programs, I use a combination of fixed effects and instrumental variable estimation where the instrumental variable is exposure to international student exchange schemes. My estimates show that studying abroad has a relatively large and statistically meaningful effect on the probability of being in employment three years after graduation. This effect is mainly driven by the impact that study abroad programs have on the employment prospects of graduates from disadvantaged (but not very disadvantaged). However, an early landmark study found that international students are likely to encounter considerable career challenges, with greater employment difficulties in comparison to their domestic peers in the country (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989). Given the difficulties, 78% of students still hope to stay in North America upon graduation and pursue a career there (Han *et al.*, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the career development of students originating from different countries who pursue post-secondary education in the USA and Canada. This paper discusses three career issues that international students face in general, including cultural barriers, help-seeking barriers, and visa restrictions. Possible interventions that could be applied to career counselling are discussed while integrating relevant career development theories, with a specific focus on Lifecareer Theory (Miller-Tiedeman, 1997) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent *et al.*, 2002). Even though student experiences and visa policies vary across countries, issues discussed in this paper hold great relevance to international students in Europe as research has identified similar factors that facilitate or impede their adaptation, such as language barriers, cultural transition and identification, the dominance of the host culture, academic and structural support, and visa difficulties (Abdulai *et al.*, 2021; Alberts, 2019; Brisset *et al.*, 2010; Han *et al.*, 2022; Hayes, 2019; Hyams-Ssekasi & Caldwell, 2019; Mikuláš & Jitka, 2019).

Career issues affecting international students' career development

Cultural barriers

Each country's culture is formed based on its unique history, it is linked with citizens' experiences growing up and can have great impacts on an individual's personality and way of thinking. Cultural differences could be seen as the top issue affecting international students' employment, especially for Eastern students staying in Western countries.

A majority of international students would experience a cross-cultural transition after their landing in the host country. The purpose is to adjust themselves adopting to the novel culture in a timely manner. While learning in the host country, many international students recognize the gap between two cultures and find that their familiar way of functioning is more or less disrupted when exposed to the host country's norms and behaviours (Crockett & Hays, 2011). International students also tend to experience more adjustment problems than domestic students due to the stressors created by cross-cultural transitions, and the problems usually become more obvious in job seeking circumstances (Leong & Sedlacek, 1986). For international students who are not native speakers of English, language barriers are one of the distinct adjustment concerns making them more vulnerable (Chen, 1999). It is not only the basic requirement for daily living but also the necessary skill for academic and occupational activities (Chen, 1999). Other primary adjustment problems could be academic difficulties, discrimination, inadequate financial resources, social adjustment difficulties, homesickness, and employment related worries (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Hyams-Ssekasi & Caldwell, 2019). With the appearance of all these problems, international students would experience a high stress level during adaptation, which can increase their susceptibility to comorbid psychological symptoms and physical illnesses. The most common somatic symptoms would be loss of appetite, problems sleeping, and headaches, along with psychological symptoms like anxiety, depression, disorientation, and social withdrawal (Chen, 1999; Crockett & Hays, 2011). As a negative feedback loop, international students' mental and physical illnesses could further delay the process of adjustments to the host country and prolong the amount of time needed on the cross-cultural transition.

One further challenge to the cross-cultural transition for international students' career development is the challenge of adapting to the unfamiliar and possibly unspoken cultural job search norms (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). With the lack of knowledge on the host country's employment opportunities, international students tend to face more difficulties, especially at the beginning of their job search. As the norms could be very different between countries, international students could be unfamiliar with using the internet and other electronic resources to gain information on job opportunities, as well as not knowing the appropriate directions to look for resources (Spencer-Rogers & Cortijo, 1998). Besides electronic approaches to locating job positions, international students may also not notice the importance of networking in job search and may even have a cultural misunderstanding of networking as for the purpose of nepotism (Spencer-Rogers, 2000).

On the other hand, with all the years spent in the host country, international students are more likely to get adjusted to the host country. Meanwhile, international students'

opportunities of re-entering their home country for career development start to get limited. With all the experience learning and working in the foreign country, international students expect to be offered a well-paying job within a short period of time. However, in reality, it is hard to find work opportunities in the home country that are different or better than those in the host country (Butcher, 2002). Furthermore, international students' friendships and social networks would also change gradually during the time they are abroad (Butcher, 2002).

Another cultural barrier may be the influence of culture on international students' personal identities. One study reported that Asian and non-Asian international students tend to indicate a higher familial influence when making decisions on careers than domestic students from the United States (Singaravelu et al., 2005). An earlier case study from Arthur and Popadiuk (2010) examined a Muslim woman from Iran who later came to Canada as an international student. They found that in order to respect her parents' wishes, she decided to pursue a science or business degree instead of sociology, which was her actual interest (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). She struggled a lot due to this decision. She experienced more stress and got uncertain about her future (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). This situation is quite common amongst many international students, especially those from collectivist cultures. They accept their families' expectations and do not view their own wishes as the most important factor in career decision-making (Henry & Fouad, 2007).

International students' cultural barriers also include the need to understand and overcome differences between Western countries' corporate culture and their home countries' corporate culture when seeking a job in the host country. They might be different in a lot of specific ways, including their definition of appropriate dress, assertiveness while working, self-promotion behaviours, the common language used in a corporate environment, and preference for maintaining direct eye contact (Spencer-Rogers, 2000; Spencer-Rogers & Cortijo, 1998; Zunz & Oil, 2009). Some of the customs could even be opposite between two cultures, thus, it is quite difficult for international students to digest and fit in. A lack of understanding of corporate culture would also limit international students' capabilities to make career decisions informed by comparisons between the working environment in the host country and the home country (Arthur & Flynn, 2011).

Barriers to help-seeking behaviours

External help-seeking behaviours could be a useful way to address an individual's problems and confusions. One of the most common ways to help with career development is through career counselling, and it is widely used by Western families and students. However, international students are experiencing heightened barriers to help-seeking behaviours compared to domestic students.

Data showed that current counselling centres in colleges and universities are commonly underutilized, with only 9% of students seeking help from the centres (Crockett & Hays, 2011). Research documented international students' hesitation when seeking professional counselling assistance (Singaravelu et al., 2005). Several factors are found to contribute to their hesitation. Language barriers are the first category. It is international students' difficulties in speaking and understanding the English language that makes communication with professionals a burden to them and discourages them from seeking help (Zunz & Oil, 2009).

The second factor contributing to hesitation is linked to cultural differences, specifically differences in cultural norms and values. In contrast to Western countries, international students tend to grow up possessing collectivist values, which have more dependence on families and friends (Yi et al., 2003). Instead of reaching out to counselling centres and outside resources, they favour gaining support from people that are closer to them. Not only that, international students would have different basic beliefs on counselling, along with severe stigma associated with it (Mori, 2000). For example, individuals may not see counselling as normal and may even feel shame around the act of seeking help. The circumstances that may lead them to actively seek help from counselling when the severity of psychological problems has escalated.

The third factor behind international students' hesitation is their lack of experience in counselling (Mitchell et al., 2007). With the different beliefs and stigma mentioned previously, international students would not usually have the motivation to initiate the counselling processes, especially given the unfamiliar environment in the host country. Besides, international students tend to have limited knowledge regarding the organizations that offer counselling services, what services are available to them, or the process of interpersonal counselling.

With all these factors presented in front of international students, they would not believe that seeking external help like counselling is worthwhile. Even for those who tried to seek out counselling services, the lack of adequate knowledge could lead to their false expectation of counselling. For example, if they do not know the proper way that counselling is conducted, they may not understand the importance of the exploration process during counselling. Instead, they may expect the counsellor to give all the answers they want and solve their problems all at once. In this way, international students' differences in values and expectations may lead to dissatisfaction with the counselling service (Shen & Herr, 2004).

Visa restrictions

A major difference between international students and domestic students is the status they obtain that allows them to legally stay in the country. As domestic students being the permanent residents, most international students always need to apply for a visa to maintain their right of residence. Visa status is illustrated to be an issue that can largely restrict and reduce international students' employment opportunities (Spencer-Rogers & Cortijo, 1998). International students also face confusing government policies and work authorization procedures that regulate employment, which would consume their time in addition to job search (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). With visa restrictions, international students have to take more factors into account while making career related decisions. They may have to reconsider their personal career goals and aspiration based on their visa status and further evaluate the feasibility of the career plan given the current government policies. For example, when international students have long-term plans of staying in the host country, they need to consider the expiration date of their visa and change their plans accordingly. Almost half of the international alumni returned back to their home country mostly or entirely due to work and visa related reasons, including better job opportunities back home, trouble securing good job opportunities in the host country, or trouble securing a work visa there (Crockett & Hays, 2011).

The United States, a destination for many international students, has different policies facing international students before and after graduation. For currently registered students in general, their visa would give them a permit to work part-time on-campus for a maximum of 20 hours weekly. They cannot legally engage in any off-campus employment without authorization from the host institution. For international graduates, they could apply for post-graduation Optional Practical Training (OPT), which gives them a 12-month temporary permit to be employed regardless of their future intention of remaining in the United States or returning to their home country (Spencer-Rogers, 2000). After the expiration of OPT, unlike the direct application, they would need to find an employer who is willing to “sponsor” the employee for a visa (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). Even then, the application for a visa is not guaranteed. The visa is given through a random selection process, which means that only about one-third of the applicants each year would be provided with a visa allowing them to work in the United States legally (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). For those who do not obtain the visa, they would have to leave the country. Given all the difficulties and uncertainties in applying for a visa, many of the employers would choose not to hire international students and save the time for other domestic candidates (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017).

In Canada, the policy for international students before graduation is quite similar to the United States. Students also need to follow the 20-hour of work restriction, but they may be allowed to work on-campus or off-campus based on the conditions given on their study permit (IRCC, 2020b). Canada’s policies are less restricted on international graduates. In general, international students who complete their degrees in Canada could apply for a post-graduation work permit. For those who complete a degree with a programme duration longer than two years, they would normally be provided with a work permit lasting for three years (IRCC, 2020a). This would allow international students to make relatively settled plans with more time to consider their future career paths. The immigration policies also provide more options for international graduates who plan to stay in Canada permanently (IRCC, 2019). Nonetheless, nothing is guaranteed in terms of visa application or immigration status when one has the identity of an international student.

Compared to the United States and Canada, which are typically seen as immigration countries, Europe – and the United Kingdom specifically – do not have a history of a consistently positive view of immigration (Hansen, 2014). Since the 1999 Bologna Declaration, Europe has started to promote international student mobility and attract students from outside of Europe, along with embracing more liberal visa and immigration policies (López-Duarte et al., 2021). In 2023, international students who complete their undergraduate or graduate degrees in the United Kingdom are eligible to apply for a Graduate visa that allows them to work for two years (GOV.UK, 2021). Even though the Graduate visa is unextendable, they have the option to switch it to a Skilled Worker visa if eligibility criteria are met. Nonetheless, the adverse labour market environment with heightened risks of unemployment and declined entry wage creates a less favourable condition for international students to meet such criteria (Han et al., 2022; Weisser, 2016).

Career counselling interventions to support international students

Exploration of the self

The exploration of the self is culturally situated (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). As discussed earlier, with international students' decision of staying in the host country, they start to manage the cross-cultural transition of living and learning in another country. Through this transition, they would develop new understandings of who they are in terms of their relationships, their futures, and the world around them. It is a period of confusion. Utilizing the framework of the Lifecareer Theory from Miller-Tiedeman (1997), which sees each individual as his or her own theory maker (Sharf, 2013), it promotes the view of not looking for a career because life is the career.

One aspect of the Lifecareer Theory emphasizes the importance of having the individual listen to their own personal beliefs instead of listening to what others think of. In terms of counselling, it could be particularly important for counsellors to advise international students to avoid too much familial influence and have more belief in themselves. Take the case study from Arthur and Popadiuk (2010) as an example, where the international student from Iran altered her area of study and started to pursue an area that she was not interested in due to her family's opinion. With the application of the Lifecareer Theory, she might have stronger beliefs in her own opinions and could experience less stress and confusion and continue in her chosen field.

Another aspect of the Lifecareer Theory promotes not fighting or working against the lifecareer. Instead, individuals should flow with it. To apply this to the situation of international students, with all the uncertainties in front of them, it is hard to make a perfect plan and follow it all the way through. Leading international students to flow with lifecareer could benefit them, in that they may adjust themselves during the cross-cultural transition and further cope with visa challenges.

Strengthen self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a key concept of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 2002). It is an individual's belief that they can successfully accomplish something (Lent et al., 2002). It is proposed that individual views on their abilities and capacities can affect their academics, career, and many other choices (Sharf, 2013). With a low sense of self-efficacy, individuals will think that they cannot do the task well and may not be able to persist. Oppositely, individuals with high self-efficacy believe that they have the capacity to do the task and will feel encouraged to accomplish it. Self-efficacy is a changing set of beliefs, which means it is something individuals and counsellors can work on to improve gradually (Sharf, 2013). In relation to international students specifically, self-efficacy could also affect students' abilities to overcome proximal contextual factors, such as the cultural barriers discussed. If the international student from the Arthur and Popadiuk (2010) case study developed high self-efficacy in her abilities to excel in sociology, she might be more certain about a future in sociology and less fearful of disappointing her parents because she has chosen a path not approved by them. Therefore, for career counsellors to provide intervention, they could focus on ways to improve international students' self-efficacy to reduce the cultural barriers amongst them.

A typical way of strengthening self-efficacy is through the social cognitive model. Basically, an individual's self-efficacy is set based on their learning experiences, which **are** affected by their performance outcomes. With satisfactory learning experiences and performance outcomes, individuals will, in turn, have higher self-efficacy. Based on this relation, one of the strategies that a counsellor could use is to suggest the student perform tasks that are within their zone of proximal development; tasks that are challenging enough to trigger growth in ability but not too difficult or too easy, as to affect the learning experience.

Despite the various strategies possible to promote self-efficacy, international students must believe in themselves, knowing it is normal for international students to be confused at the moment of transition **and**, most importantly, knowing they have the capacity to overcome difficulties and accomplish their goals. This would enable the students **to** go through the cross-cultural transition faster and more easily adjust to the environment.

Promote the utilisation of counselling

Research has pointed out the underutilisation problem of counselling centres in colleges and universities and international students' hesitation in terms of reaching out to the centres (Crockett & Hays, 2011). For counsellors to provide intervention, the counselling programme could be modified to provide specialized career counselling for international students. This may attract them to seek out external career counselling as well as to make the programme more friendly to them. Data has shown that 76% of international students indicated their need to learn about the United States' occupational system, while 77% of them wished to connect with a career counsellor to discuss career plans and goals, indicating there is a demand for counselling for international students (Spencer-Rogers, 2000).

Specialized career counselling could target population-specific occupational obstacles, which are rarely tackled in the common career counselling processes. First of all, similar to all other counselling, career counselling for international students would provide information for the general career planning process, such as self-assessing, decision making, and goal setting. Secondly, for international students specifically, the counselling would help solidify their occupational identity, support them in understanding visa regulations, and help them obtain relevant career information. Counsellors would help international students adjust to Western corporate work culture and familiarize them with the host country's specific job search strategies. Simultaneously, specialized counselling may assist international students in understanding how government policies will impact their career planning. In the case of the international student from Iran (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010), she would benefit immensely from career counselling to make an informed decision. Counsellors could present a comparison of the employment prospects for science, business, and sociology, and review relevant course load, post-graduation possibilities, and visa policies. Simultaneously, counselling might help her navigate her relationship with her parents and abate feelings of stress.

In addition to specialized career counselling, another intervention could be to reach out to the international student population instead of expecting them to come in for counselling services. This could be an effective way to lessen students' barriers to help-seeking behaviours. The reaching out action could be done in various formats. For instance, counsellors could form a small counselling outreach team, holding relevant information sessions and counselling seminars introducing some basic knowledge on the counselling process and their specialized counselling programme. The sessions could be open to

the public and located in areas having a high density of international students. Besides, school counselling centres could also form a partnership with other university offices that international students are contacting frequently, such as a student health centre. This could point out the direction for international students to search for and make career counselling more approachable to students.

Extend the length of stay

One study has reported a correlation between low acculturation and high occupational identity amongst a group of international students from China (Shih & Brown, 2000). The study further explained that the benefits of low acculturation levels are due to those students' clear and stable understanding of their abilities, interests, and career aspirations. Another study found that with a longer duration of international students remaining in the host country, they tend to have plans to stay in the country for an even longer amount of time (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). Furthermore, they tend to seek out more information on immigration regulations, visa requirements, and local career information (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). Similarly, in comparison to those international students who plan to leave, those who plan for post-graduation residency are reported to have fewer instances of cultural difficulties, are more willing to engage in intercultural communications with domestic residents in the host country, and are more adapted to the culture and representative elements from the host country, including the utilisation of counselling and mental health services (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Knipscheer & Kleber, 2001).

This supports the idea that the length of stay in the host country could help international students better adapt to the country's culture and better connect with domestic residents, which is beneficial for their career development in the host country.

Conclusion

With the internationalization of the world, the international student population is growing to be recognized as one of the major groups of residents in society. Despite the opportunities offered to international students when they go abroad, they experience several barriers that may contribute to difficulty securing employment post-graduation. This includes, but is not limited to, cultural barriers, barriers to help-seeking behaviours, and visa restrictions.

Career counsellors aim to support individuals in navigating career decisions within their lives. In order to do this, they must take into account the individual seeking counselling and the context within which they find themselves. International students represent a specialized population with a certain context that must be examined and explored. Career counsellors could play a crucial role in aiding international students' career development. This paper has outlined two ways career counsellors can use career theories to assist international students: 1) utilizing the Lifecareer Theory to promote students' exploration of self, and 2) utilizing Social Cognitive Career Theory to promote self-efficacy. Furthermore, career counsellors may consider increasing counselling services' utilisation and access to care. They may accomplish this by proactively reaching out to international students and offering their counselling services. In addition, prolonging international students' length of stay may help international students plan for their career development and support them to be more prepared for the job market.

International students are continuing to come to countries such as the United States and Canada for post-secondary education and in growing numbers. While they may benefit from the education they receive here, it is important they similarly benefit from the career opportunities available to them. The aim of this paper was to suggest specific career interventions and how they may help alleviate the issues faced by international students. In addition to the guidance mentioned in this paper, career development literature should consider further specific interventions that may help this population be successful in their career lives.

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