

Challenges and Strategies for the Adaptation of International Students to the Canadian Workplace

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Abstract

International students have a significant impact on the host country's economy. In Canada, they can help create jobs, contribute to the GDP, and solve the problem of labour shortages. Despite their significant contribution, international students have undergone a lot of challenges without appropriate support. Many international students reported being discriminated against due to many factors ranging from the language barrier to the lack of local experience. Thus, they experience mental distress and physical health issues. This study will explore the challenges that international students are facing and the strategies that they implemented to adapt to the Canadian workplace. The significance of the student can help policymakers develop plans to support international student workers, which ultimately contribute to the Canadian economy. The study result confirms the challenges faced by international student workers in previous literature. Several adaptation strategies were identified, such as 1) building networks, 2) gaining local working experience through volunteering, internship or on-campus jobs, 3) utilizing support from the university or professors, 4) leveraging family or friend support, and 5) upgrade their skill and knowledge to better fit with the new working environment.

Keywords

International Students, Migrant Workers, Globalization

1. Introduction

Migration workers have become a global phenomenon lately. The total number of migration workers has increased significantly in the last couple of decades to approximately 281 million, which is roughly 3.6 percent of the world population

(World Migration Report, 2022). Much research has shown that immigrant workers work under poor conditions and experience mental distress while getting low compensation (Mucci et al., 2019; Adhikary et al., 2018; Farbenblum & Berg, 2017). International student workers are a subcategory of migrant workers and are considered an essential source of labour supply, according to Statistics Canada (Crossman & Hou, 2022). In this paper, a qualitative phenomenological study will be conducted to explore the issues faced by international student workers in Canada and the strategies they use to better adapt to the working environment in the host country. The study will help to shed light on the issues faced by international student workers, and it can provide policy suggestions to improve the experience of international students in Canada.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Migrant Workers Around the World

Migrant workers are critical to the host countries' economies. They account for a significant portion of the labour force. For instance, migrant workers are more than one-third of the labour force in the Arab states, which host the greatest number of migrant workers compared to any other region in the world (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). In addition, they provide a significant source of remittance and transfer back skills to the home countries. Most of the migrant workers come from Asia, and more than two-thirds work in the service industry.

Despite their significant contribution, migrant workers are “subject to human rights violations, abuse, human trafficking, and violence” (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). According to the authors, they are more likely to work in 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demanding). This is especially true if the migrant workers are lack of work authorization in the host countries. They are exposed to environmental risks such as extreme weather, toxins (Pesticides) or other physical hazards (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). They work in an industry where safety standards are not followed properly and are being abused by other stakeholders. Moreover, they have very limited access to the healthcare system.

Moyce and Schenker (2018) also show that migrant workers are negatively exposed to the political climate. For instance, the visa structure in the United States makes migrant workers more vulnerable by making it a mandatory requirement that the foreign worker is attached to a specific employer or sponsor to avoid losing their legal status (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). A similar issue is also found in Canada. Thus, it pushes migrant workers to accept jobs with poor conditions.

Previous literature has pointed out many issues faced by migration workers in the host countries. According to Mucci et al. (2019), migration workers experience mental distress because they are discriminated against, distanced from family and moved down in their social status. Moreover, many of them are abused either verbally or physically and have to accept working under dangerous conditions (Mucci et al., 2019). The exploitation of migration is considered a violation of human rights (Farbenblum & Berg, 2017). It is consistent with other studies

reporting that migrant workers are working under poor conditions with low pay.

Another study by [Adhikary et al. \(2018\)](#) showed that many migrant workers work in the farming, manufacturing, and construction sectors, which have a higher rate of injury. Many migrant workers experience mental illness or mental distress. In the case of Nepali migrant workers, the reason that they are willing to take risky and unsafe jobs in foreign countries is because the working conditions in their home country are also very poor ([Adhikary et al., 2018](#)).

[Morgan and Finnear \(2009\)](#) indicated an interesting issue with migrant workers: they are under the allegation of taking away jobs from domestic workers, especially during economic downturns and the rise of unemployment. However, [Morgan and Finnear \(2009\)](#) also state that immigrant labour helps host countries deal with labour shortages or an aging population. Many immigrant workers are working in low-skill jobs. The authors pointed out the consequences of the unfair treatment of international workers. Traditionally, there is a psychological contract, which is an unwritten agreement between employees and employers. It is expected that employees will be treated fairly and equally in return for their commitment and loyalty to the employers. The psychological contract will help to build trust between the two parties. Furthermore, it will help to improve teamwork and positively contribute to employee performance ([Morgan & Finnear, 2009](#)). However, the unfair treatment of migrant workers has negatively altered this psychological contract significantly. Thus, it will reduce the effectiveness and productivity at the workplace.

[Peterson \(2021\)](#) explained that the rationale behind the exploitation of international workers was that businesses were trying to find cheap labour and minimal compliance with government regulations (p. 143). The United States alone has more than 10 million undocumented immigrants. Under the law, it is illegal to hire undocumented workers. However, in practice, it is hard to enforce the law. Thus, these workers are subjected to exploitation. Many international workers work in unsafe environments, and they don't get compensation even if a work injury happens. Moreover, they do not have pension plans or other benefits ([Peterson, 2021](#): pp. 143-148).

2.2. Experience of International Students

Globalization has contributed to the increase of international students around the world ([Halpern, Halpern, & Aydin, 2022](#)). There are 6.4 million international students around the world. This represents an approximate increase of four-fold in the last 20 years. The top destinations are the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada ([Which Countries Will Be the Next Big Destinations for International Students? 2023](#)).

International students are considered temporary workers since they have temporary visas with the right to work ([Farbenblum & Berg, 2017](#)). In the case of Australia, international students are allowed to work 40 hours every two weeks during the school year and unlimited hours during the breaks ([Farbenblum &](#)

Berg, 2017). In the US, international students on F1 visas are allowed to work up to 20 hours on campus. For work off campus, they will need to demonstrate their economic hardship (US Department of Homeland Security, 2023). In the United Kingdom, international students are allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours per week (Working in the United Kingdom under a student visa, 2023).

Halpern, Halpern, and Aydin (2022) pointed out that it is challenging for international students to adapt to the host countries. The lack of intercultural competence can “significantly impact students’ academic and social experiences” (Halpern, Halpern, & Aydin, 2022). The challenges of studying abroad will have an impact on the student’s academic performance (Singh, 2021). Thus, they need to develop a resilience strategy, which includes “adjustment to stress, hardship, or change” (Singh, 2021). Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) showed that international students experienced more mental health problems compared to domestic students due to the fact that they live in a foreign country and are distanced from family. Moving to a new country can add to the stress level for those students. Language, “unfamiliar academic practices,” financial pressure, and living on their own are some of the challenges that international students face. Thus, they are more likely to have high levels of anxiety and depression (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). However, they are hesitant to use any counselling service due to the belief that it is only for people who are mentally ill people.

Lértora and Sullivan (2019) reported that international students receive very limited support for the transition from school to work. As a result, international students can experience stress or depression. In their qualitative study on Chinese international students in the United States, the authors identified five main themes that impact the students’ transition from school to work: family connection, working harder than others, feeling stressed, social support, and feeling of uncertainty (Lértora & Sullivan, 2019). The authors called for support services to help international students transition from school to work smoothly.

Nyland et al. (2009) conducted research in Australia and found out that international students are vulnerable and can be exploited compared to domestic peers. On the one hand, they also showed the benefits of employment to international students in terms of finances and work experience. On the other hand, international students can be exploited since they have limited skills, which makes it hard to find jobs, and they might not know the rights to which they are entitled (Nyland et al., 2009). Indeed, international students are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to negotiating with employers. Nyland et al. (2009) also pointed out an example of international students in the United Kingdom working more hours beyond the legal limit attached to their student visas. Therefore, the fear of being deported can put them in a weaker position. Many international student workers face discrimination due to their language skills. As a result, more than half of the students in the study earn less than the minimum wage.

The more extreme issues that international students are experiencing include racial discrimination and violence. Ramia (2021) conducted a study on international students in Australia and New Zealand. International students are sometimes

stereotyped as having lousy driving skills or even associating with criminal organizations (Ramia, 2021). Regarding violence, it was reported that international students were “verbally abused, beaten in groups and individually; others being robbed, stabbed” (Ramia, 2021). To address these issues, the author suggested that it is critical that governments come up with a systematic strategy and policies for crisis responses.

2.3. International Students in Canada

The economic impact of international students in Canada is significant. International students contributed CA\$ 22.3 billion to the Canadian economy and helped to support 218,000 jobs in the country (The Impact of International Students on Destination Economies, 2023). Furthermore, they account for approximately one-quarter of all post-secondary students in the country. International students also help to solve the problem of the aging population in Canada (The Impact of International Students on Destination Economies, 2023). The government of Canada has been trying to retain skilled workers from the international student pool to help support the economy in the future (Scott et al., 2015). The potential ability to immigrate makes it more attractive for international students to choose to come to Canada (El Masri & Khan, 2022).

Working off campus as an international student on a study permit can benefit both the students and the Canadian economy. On the one hand, gaining working experience during school time is critical to the success of international students in Canada. “Immigrants with Canadian study experience earned more than other immigrants in the initial years after immigration mostly because of their Canadian work experience” (Crossman & Hou, 2022). On the other hand, international student workers helped to solve the labour shortage in the country (Donnini, 2023). Normally, international students on study permits are allowed to work up to 20 hours per week off campus. However, due to the labour shortage after the COVID-19 pandemic, the government temporarily lifted the restriction and allowed international students to work for more than 20 hours per week from November 2022 to the end of 2023 (Donnini, 2023).

Similar to other countries, international students in Canada also face challenges in integrating into the new environment, which results in mental distress. They face common issues of language barrier, homesickness, and even racial discrimination (Scott et al., 2015). As a result, they are experiencing both mental health and physical health issues (El Masri & Khan, 2022). Finding housing is another challenge faced by international students in Canada. Regarding the transition to work, Canadian employers are unwilling to hire international students. Many international students reported being discriminated against due to their “immigration status, race, culture, language ability” (El Masri & Khan, 2022).

The current body of literature has shown the challenges that international workers face. However, there is a gap in focusing on a subgroup of international student workers, specifically in Canada. Moreover, it is critical to understand the

strategies that international students can use to overcome the issues that they are experiencing in the workplace. Therefore, in this study, the authors will investigate the approach that international student workers can take to help them overcome the problem and integrate themselves into the Canadian workplace.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges and adaptation strategies of international students in the Canadian workplace. The goal is to explore the lived experiences of the participant; qualitative phenomenology is an appropriate research design (Creswell, 2013). Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with ten international students from various institutions who are currently working in Canada. Creswell (2013) indicated that a sample size of 3 to 25 should be adequate for phenomenological design. The authors used a convenient sampling method to select the participants for this research project. The participants are currently or recently graduated international students within a year, and they are currently employed. All interviews were conducted from February to May 2024. The recorded data was transcribed and analyzed for common themes using a qualitative analysis tool (Taguette). To protect the identity of the participants, all names were removed, and the participants will be referred to as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), and so on. Collected data is protected and destroyed in accordance with the policy of the Research Ethics Board of University Canada West.

Interview Questions

- 1) Demographic questions.
 - a) How old are you? What is your country of origin?
 - b) How long have you been in Canada as an international student?
 - c) What is your current job? How many hours do you work per week?
 - d) Do you have any work experience before coming to Canada?
- 2) Explore the challenges.
 - a) What are the issues that you faced when looking for a job?
 - b) Why did you choose your current job?
 - c) What are the challenges that you are facing when working in Canada?
 - d) What kind of training have you received prior to or during work?
 - e) How are you treated by others (employers, co-workers, customers, etc.)?
 - f) How does your job impact your academic performance and vice versa?
- 3) Strategies to adapt to the environment.
 - a) How do you deal with the issues that you are facing at the workplace?
 - b) What financial or mental health support do you receive to deal with your issues?
 - c) What kind of support do you think will help to improve the situation?

4. Result and Discussion

Ten participants were interviewed and transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed

by the researchers to ensure quality and clarification. Member checking by verifying the responses with the participants was also used to ensure validity and triangulation (Candela, 2019). The authors then used Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool, to code the transcripts and develop themes. The researcher used inductive coding by carefully examining the transcripts and assigning codes. After that, the codes were combined to form major themes. The result is presented below.

4.1. Positive Experience

As opposed to the previous literature, it is interesting to find that international student workers in this study do have some positive experiences at the workplace. This can be explained by the different perceptions about the workplace. When evaluating their experience, the participants compared their previous experience working in their home country and in Canada. Indeed, working standards are higher in developed countries (Artuso & McLarney, 2015).

Nicely treated. As opposed to other literature reviewed, it is quite interesting to find that all participants in this study claim that they were treated nicely with respect by their current employers or direct supervisors. Below (Table 1) are several quotes from the participants:

Table 1. Perception toward how they were treated by the employers.

Participant 1	<p>“[The employer] is genuinely nice ... I am quite impressed with the standards.”</p> <p>“Quite accommodative of all the things, even for my prayers.”</p>
Participant 3	<p>“They encouraged me and motivated me, which is the best feeling I got working in Canada.”</p> <p>“The employers treated me fairly as did co workers”</p> <p>“Boss and colleagues have been helpful.”</p>
Participant 4	Employers treated me fairly as I always provided good service
Participant 8	“Employers and co-workers always treated me with respect”
Participant 9	<p>“Employers treat me very well as I have strong attention to detail, learn amazingly fast and am the top seller in our store, so got promoted very quickly”</p>

There are a couple of points that can help to explain the rationale behind this perception of being treated nicely. First, some participants (#1 and #3) used their home country’s working environment as a benchmark. Thus, they can see that the working conditions and employer-employee relationship in Canada are somewhat better. Participant 1 said that employers in his home country can exploit the workers and underpay them, while Participant 3 stated that working in Canada is more professional. Indeed, Canada has a better working environment compared

to other countries around the globe. *The Global Life-Work Balance Index* (2023) by Remote showed that Canada is one of the top 10 countries. In addition, according to Hofstede's five dimensions of culture, Canada is considered to have a low power distance compared to other countries (Morrison, 2020). Thus, it explains the friendly relationship between the managers and employees. Second, some participants expressed that they were treated nicely due to their performance, such as participants #4 and #9. In general, the participants were treated well by their employers.

Adequate training. The participant shared that they received adequate internal training from their employers. They learn a lot from their current jobs, and it can help to improve their skills for future careers (Table 2).

Table 2. Internal training received by the participants.

Participant 3	<p>“...all the training process is designed to help the customer”</p> <p>“I learned a lot from my Bosses and colleagues”</p> <p>“Yes, as a Business Development Manager, I receive a lot of training, mostly about Sales and Negotiations.”</p>
Participant 4	<p>“...received on the job training and now ongoing training”</p>
Participant 7	<p>“I got a lot of training prior to starting and on the job training”</p>
Participant 8	<p>“All the training on the job and my colleagues showed me how everything worked”</p>
Participant 10	<p>“...get some extra training on how best to manage the store”</p>

4.2. Negative Experience

The findings in this study confirmed some of the issues faced by international student workers in the previous literature.

Rudeness, or bullying. Although the participants were treated well by their employers, several encountered unpleasant experiences with other stakeholders. For instance, participants #3, #4, #6, and #10 pointed out that they experienced problems with the customers, including rude behaviour and harassment. Other participants experienced bullying behaviours from their coworkers. Participant #3 expressed, “Sometimes we need to hear... like... hear them shouting at us, even though it is not our fault.”

Language barrier and discrimination. Three participants in the study perceived that they were discriminated against. In the hiring process, participant #5 stated that she did not get one of the jobs due to her background. Participant #5 stated, “It’s like there was a little... little bit of bias also like and also like their country people, there are more into looking for hiring their country people.” participants #6 and #7 explicitly said they faced racism. The language or communication barrier is consistent with previous studies that show foreign workers face a language barrier at work (Table 3).

Table 3. Language barrier faced by international students.

Participant 3	“Communication was the biggest challenge for me, when my Bosses did not understand my English and I had to explain everything repeatedly”
Participant 5	“So even the language is a barrier.”
Participant 7	“Working in Canada in the beginning was challenging as there were a lot of communication challenges”
Participant 8	“Working in a different culture, there were a lot of communication challenges”
Participant 9	“English is not my first language; hence I faced a lot of issues dealing with others in a different language.”

Other issues. Several other issues were identified by the participants in this research. Some graduate students who had intensive experience in their home countries found themselves under-employed in Canada. They have to work in lower-level positions or in different fields. Furthermore, the cost of living in Canada is higher than in their home country, which causes some financial burden for these international student workers. Lastly, about half of the students pointed out that working, which is critical to support them financially, has a negative impact on their academic performance.

4.3. Strategy

Strategy 1. Build network

More than half of the students in this study recognize the importance of having a network to be successful in their careers. One participant stated that when he arrived in Canada, he “did not know anybody nor anything about the jobs.” Moreover, many jobs require local references, which is hard for new international students to Canada to obtain. As a result, the participants tried to develop their network, starting with classmates or professors. Quite a few also consider attending networking events in their field or creating professional profiles on business social media platforms like LinkedIn to help them connect with others.

Strategy 2. Gain local working experience with on-campus jobs, volunteering, and internship

Many jobs in Canada require candidates to have local working experience. Seven out of 10 students claimed to have prior working experience in their home countries. This is still a weakness for international students since they recently arrived in a new country. Indeed, some graduate-level students, even in management positions, have many years of professional experience. They still find it hard to get a job or be under-employed. To compensate for this weakness, many participants decided to get on-campus employment as a peer tutor or research assistant. Others decide to volunteer or secure an internship position, which is quite limited.

Strategy 3. Get support from the university service or professors

Half of the participants stated that getting support from the institution's career service department is critical for them to get the job. For instance, the career service can help students to polish their resumes or direct them to jobs that fit them. Alternatively, students approach their professors and ask for job opportunities or reference letters. Apparently, the professors, who are more familiar with the host country, are the rarely direct contact for these international students who are new to the country.

Strategy 4. Leverage family or friend support

The student's families or relatives can provide mental or financial support. For example, participant #3 shared, "I am lucky to be living with my wife, who is also working in the bank and has a professional job; hence, financially, we were ok, and now we are planning to buy our first home in Canada within the year." Participant #7 appreciates the fact that he lives with his relative: "I am lucky living with my aunt and uncle... almost my family." Having relatives in Canada can provide international students with great support.

Friends, which is part of the student social network, provide various types of support. First, several students got their current jobs through referrals from their friends. Second, friends can provide advice and mental support for international students when they face personal problems and no family surrounds them. Indeed, living in a foreign country, friends can be critical to the students' mental wellness.

Strategy 5. Improve skills to adapt to the environment

Some students pointed out several other strategies that can help them to adapt to the working environment in a foreign country, which includes upgrading their skills and being positive and mentally prepared. Participant #1, who has a background in medicine in his home country, is preparing for the licensing exam to enable him to practice in Canada. Others decide to improve their language skills by attending Toastmasters' Club. Being positive is another way to keep these students motivated in a foreign country.

5. Conclusion

International students are an important part of Canadian education. Ensuring their success is critical to our education system. In this study, the authors looked at the experience of international students in the Canadian workplace. The study result confirms previous literature regarding the challenges faced by international students, such as bullying, language barrier and underemployment. However, it is quite interesting to find out that these students are nicely and respectfully treated by their employers or direct supervisors. Regarding strategies, the participants in this study have suggested several ways to be successful in the Canadian workplace as an international student: 1) building networks, 2) gaining local working experience through volunteering internships or on-campus jobs, 3) utilizing support from the university or professors, 4) leverage on family or friend support, and 5)

upgrade their skill and knowledge to better fit with the new working environment. Some policy recommendations include academic institutions providing better career support for international students and organizing more networking events. This study has the limitation of having a small sample size and is geographically limited to the Greater Vancouver region. Future studies can look at the challenges and strategies of international in different parts of the world or conduct a quantitative study to examine the cause or consequence of these challenges.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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