International Students' Views of Relationship Influences on Career Transitions

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Abstract

Little attention has been paid to the career trajectories of international students as they complete their academic programs and implement career decision plans post-graduation. The specific aim of this study was to identify what factors contributed to international students' success in pursuing employment in the destination country post-graduation. Our study examined the experiences of international students who had successfully transitioned from university to employment post-graduation in Canada. We used the Feminist Biographical Method to examine the individual stories of international students as a way of understanding the contextual influences on their lives and on their career decision-making. Individual interviews were conducted with 19 international students, two in their last semester, and 17 who had graduated and who were working in Canada. All students were graduates of one university in Western Canada. The key influences related to international students' implementing their career plans post-graduation were organized around 5 themes that ranged from macro and systems influences to interpersonal and intrapersonal influences: (1) Systemic and Institutional Barriers, (2) Employment Challenges, (3) Perceived Career Opportunities, (4) Importance of Relationships, and, (5) Personal Growth and Discovering Strengths. Relationships were the key influences for helping international students overcome perceived barriers. Relationships offered international students emotional and instrumental support in making career decisions, in gaining relevant employment experience, and in persisting with plans to implement their career goals. International students benefit from connections, networking, and learning experiences that help them to successfully implement their career plans.

Keywords: International students, career development, cross-cultural transition

1. Introduction

The majority of literature on international students has focused on the initial stage of cross-cultural transition as they enter the destination country and begin their academic programs in a new country (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). As a general rule, the greater the degree of cultural differences between the home and host cultures, it is expected that international students will have greater degrees of acculturative stress, manifesting as signs of culture shock (Pedersen, 1991). International students' experiences have been framed through stages of cross-cultural transition (Arthur, 2007), and common concerns classified as (a) interpersonal influences in the home and host environment and (b) intrapersonal factors related to internal processes (Sandu, 1994). In reality, these common issues are complex and international students often experience them as interrelated (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

The focus of international student research has often been placed on their personal adjustment, and decontextualized from the larger sense of culture and community, social and political conditions in both home and destination countries, and the local conditions of the culture in which they live and study (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). International students are often portrayed as problem-laden, with the onus primarily placed on them to adapt to the host culture of the destination country, without examining both the supportive and constraining influences in either home or destination countries. Although popular theories of acculturation have emphasized the process of adjustment in crossing culture, there are few sources that address the positive aspects of international students' experiences (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). An emphasis on the quality of interactions with members of the destination country and opportunities for social integration are often ignored as critical aspects of cross-cultural transitions. This is an important point, because international students' academic success and future employment success are strongly shaped by their sense of positive

social interactions, sense of belonging, and support systems in both their home and destination countries (Arthur & Flynn, 2011, 2012).

2. Positioning the Current Study

Little attention has been paid to the career development needs of international student (Arthur, 2007; Singaravelu, White, & Bringaze, 2005). In past decades, due to restrictions on immigration, it was assumed that international students would return home and seek employment. However, shifting immigration policies in countries, such as Canada, have opened opportunities for international students to gain work experience post-graduation, which is pivotal for pursuing permanent immigration. Although immigration policies related to international students vary between countries, it is important to consider the career planning and decision-making needs of international students while they are students, and how institutional supports may assist them in their plans to pursue employment post-graduation.

The focus of this study was to identify the influences on international students who were planning to remain in Canada post-graduation and who had successfully made the transition to employment. Although research has substantiated the point that most international students pursue international education due to perceived career opportunities in the future (Arthur & Flynn, 2011, 2012; Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Masumba, Jin, & Mjelde, 2011), the current study focuses on the actual experiences of international students who pursued employment in the destination country. There are few studies that account for how international students successfully navigate the transition to employment in the destination country, how they overcome barriers, and what helps them to integrate into local employment and community contexts (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, & Cavazos, 2011). The current study focused on international students' perceived barriers and what they identified as facilitators of their career transition. The inquiry also focused on how relationships helped international students to navigate between academic and employment systems.

3. Methodology

In order to conduct a study on international students' career transition experiences, we selected a research approach that would uncover the nuances of social and contextual influences on their transition experiences. The biographical method (Denzin, 1989; Merrill & West, 2009; Popadiuk, 2004) was selected in order to collect individual stories that would help us to better understand the experiences of international students from their point of view of interacting with in the local culture, while maintaining their historical and cultural identities when living across cultures. The biographical method is considered a form of narrative inquiry and has been used in previous studies to explore the multifaceted phenomena in the lives of participants who are the focus of research inquiry (Denzin, 1989; Merrill & West, 2009).

A unique feature of the current study was that the design involved creating a retrospective cohort-based analysis of international students' experiences, intentionally recruiting research participants who were at various stages of the transition from education to employment. We were interested in learning more about how relationships influenced career transitions from the points of views of international students in the final semester of their academic program who were preparing to enter the employment market, the experiences of graduates who were employed for less than three years, as well as graduates who could provide details regarding the longer-term implications of their transition from higher education to employment. This design allowed us to hear the perspectives of international students who were in the process of making plans for the university to employment transition, the experiences of graduates who had successfully connected to the labour market, and the retrospective experiences of graduates who could provide additional insights into how relationships were connected to pursuing their career goals.

The participants in this study were originally recruited for a study on international student strengths and successes. Potential participants were recruited via two list-serves at a mid-sized urban university in Western Canada. The list-serves included current international students and international student alumni who had graduated from their academic program. As more students volunteered for the original study than could be included, they were invited to keep their names on a waiting list for a future research project. Permission from the Ethics Boards of the two researchers' universities was obtained to contact potential participants for inclusion in the second study. Recall that the aim of the current study was to emphasize what facilitated successful international student career transitions. Consequently, in response to the recruitment notice, the participants first identified as current or former international students, and secondly self-identified as successful. There was an intentional focus on the strengths of international students, and the key influences on their career transition from education to employment. This approach was not prohibitive of exploring

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perceived challenges and barriers, yet the participants in this study were keen to discuss what helped them to overcome those barriers and successfully integrate into employment post-graduation.

Individual interviews were held with the first 18 people who volunteered for the study. The demographic information that was collected from participants included their sex, age, countries of origin, length of education in the destination country, degree status, and relationship status. A summary of the demographic information is contained in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Sex: 7 men, 11 women
Age range: 26 to 69 years (8 in their 20s; 5 in their 30s; 5 were 40+)
Countries of origin: China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mexico, Chile, Germany, Ukraine, United States
Length of time studying in Canada: 2.5 to 10 years, average time 5 years
Degree status: Bachelor's degrees (13), Master's degrees (7), and post-baccalaureate diplomas (2)
Academic Major/Speciality: Gerontology, Economics, Communication, Sociology, History, Kinesiology, Biochemistry, Business Administration, Business, Geography, Political Science, Public Policy
Relationship status: 15 reported no family ties or any other connection in the host country upon arrival. Nine participants arrived single, three came with a partner (common-law or married), and six developed a partnership while studying.
Work and national status: 16 participants worked post-graduation; Canadian Citizens (7), permanent residents (9), temporary study or work permits (2).
Job and career pursuits: Investment Advisor & Portfolio Manager, Project Manager, Marketing Manager, Tariff Coordinator, Accounts Receivable Coordinator, Administration Team Leader, Case Manager, Financial Comptroller, Meteorologist, Real Estate Broker, College Instructor, Director of Research & Development, Research Technician, Research Assistant, Retired

Each person participating in the study completed a 1.5 to 2.0 hour in-depth interview with a trained research assistant, who signed an oath of confidentiality. It is noteworthy that the interviewer was also an international student in the last year of completing her Master's degree, which may have been helpful for securing the trust and detailed stories of other international students. The main interview questions focused on the transition experiences from university to employment, and international students' experiences of living and working in Canada. The interviews were transcribed by a professional who signed an oath of confidentiality. The initial transcript was reviewed by the researchers to check that the questions and probes were consistent with the interview questions developed for the study.

A second research assistant, a doctoral student trained in psychology and qualitative research methods, used NVivo qualitative software program to code the interview transcripts. The coding process involved four steps: First the research assistant initially read all of the transcripts, and made notes about initial impressions and emerging codes that would be relevant for the study (Saldaña, 2009). Next, based on the structure of these first-level nodes, the research assistant conducted a second round of open coding to create second-level nodes. The research team reviewed the coding framework and discussed any discrepancies and uncertainties until consensus was reached. Based on the discussion from this meeting, the research assistant reviewed the coded transcripts a third time to ensure that the feedback received was integrated into coding decisions and that data had not been overlooked. In the fourth and final coding cycle, the research team reviewed the second-level nodes and coded additional levels to further differentiate the coding system. The two primary researchers then met for in-depth discussions about the codes and generated the main themes that emerged from the coding framework.

4. Results

From the coded data, we developed five themes that addressed our central research question: *What are the key influences that international students identify for successful transitions from university to employment*? A major aim of this study was to better understand the relationship influences on career transitions. The key influences related to international students' implementing their career plans post-graduation were organized around 5 themes: (1) Systemic and Institutional Barriers, (2) Employment Challenges, (3) Perceived Career Opportunities, (4) Importance of Relationships, and, (5) Personal Growth and Discovering Strengths. It was interesting to see that the identified influences ranged from macro and systems influences to interpersonal and intrapersonal influences. In the following sections of the paper, a brief description of each theme is presented, along with selected quotes from the international student participants that illustrate each theme.

4.1 Systemic and Institutional Barriers

In this theme, participants talked about barriers that were encountered at systemic and institutional levels of society. These barriers include situations, policies, and practices that systematically disadvantage particular groups of people. For example, several international students expressed employer bias about Canadian experience. "If they have a Canadian applicant they might take the Canadian applicant first as opposed to international students." The systems that have evolved over time are historically built around the dominant and/or majority group who holds more power, and can be seen as taken-for-granted ways of doing business. For example, sexist and racist attitudes and practices, including a lack of cultural awareness or discriminatory practices against people who speak English as an additional language was included. From this macro perspective, issues such as immigration laws, federal government policies, and institutional hiring policies and procedures became problematic when participants attempted to gain employment, but met with unfair disadvantages.

> The very question that I was asked, I bet you say I probably have applied for about 200 jobs when I finished my MBA or before I finished my MBA, and there were quite a few job I would have been qualified for it, but the very first question that they phone me and ask was, "Are you allow to work in Canada? What is your status?"—"Oh, you are on student visa—sorry, we cannot even consider you." So that was pretty discouraging.

> During school I only had an on-campus work permit and at the time I graduated I was not able to get an off-campus work permit unless I had a job offer and people wouldn't give you a job offer unless you had a work permit. So it took me about a year, maybe a bit longer, to actually get a job where they could understand what I was going through and would be flexible with the waiting time.

Some of the participants noted changes in Canadian policy over time, based on world events, such as 9/11, or unnamed social shifts, such as a national economic need for foreign workers. These kind of societal level realities directly and indirectly influence policy reform that can either shut doors by clamping down on immigration and only giving international students three months post-graduation to secure a job in their field that no other Canadian can be hired into, or open up doors by providing work visas for three years of employment post-graduation.

> Right after we moved to Ottawa, that terrorist attack, so that changed the whole immigration laws and everything so instead of just applying for a Permanent Resident status, my assumption was maybe we can spend like seven or eight months and then I could be a permanent resident. But the entire immigration regulations kind of changed in 2001 so I decided to go back to grad school to earn a further degree to be able to stay in Canada. I had two choices: going back to Japan or going back to grad school and earn a degree and wait for my permanent resident card.

A few of our participants worried that the government policies around international students and work visas would change for the worse during their sojourn, and thereby, significantly reduce their opportunities for staying in Canada as skilled workers after they graduated. Overall, systemic and institutional barriers largely governed the number of available opportunities for participants, and thus, luck or serendipity around the policy years in which someone studied or whether or not they found a job quickly often determined the course of their personal and professional lives.

4.2 Employment Challenges

This theme provides an elaboration of the employment challenges described by participants. The theme captures the process of trying to find a co-op work position as part of their degree and the daunting task of finding meaningful employment in the participant's field of study after graduation. Participants discussed the initial phase of job hunting, including sending out resumes and realizing that job offers were not going to be automatically offered to them.

> You are sending out resumes but—I do not know the reason actually. I asked—I know why I was hired, but I do not know why I was not called for certain interviews and I mean it might be internal candidates, it might be personal references, it could be anything. I really do not have any idea what was the main reason but it is not as easy as it seems.

Thus, in this theme that focuses on job hunting, participant's stories are typically punctuated by challenges and barriers to obtaining a job or to finding a job that is a good fit for their expertise. One participant emphasized the main link between employment and pursuing immigration: "The only barrier before I can stay here is definitely to find a job."

English language skill proficiency is something that many participants noted about finding a co-op position or a job post-graduation, and stated that many Canadians are not patient with accents and language challenges.

> Also, when your English is not good, like people are not patient, which I totally understand. I'm like that now too. And then sometimes you get this feeling like people think you are stupid but then I'm not stupid, I'm probably smarter than you but just because my language does not allow me to express who I am on that level yet does not make me

stupid. So that was the hardest part in the entire experience.

Sometimes there are hints of prejudice and discrimination during the process of looking for work that are often subtle and individually targeted.

You know what was actually very discouraging was when I applied for the co-op program, I could tell they didn't want me because I was international and the lady that interviewed me—there were enough spots for everyone so she knew basically they had to accept pretty much everyone that had applied into the program but she tried to dissuade me really hard. She said, "You know you are not going to get a job. You are going to have to write forty applications to get a job." And I was, "I'm prepared to do that." And she was trying really hard to tell me not to go for it.

I did not fit in at all. I was this ridiculous Chinese girl who was so ambitious and worked insane hours for no reason. I didn't even get paid that much, and I wanted to become a commercial broker. I don't think they had confidence in me, which I understand. Like I'm just this Chinese girl. Everybody is white male and oh my god, when you talk to those brokers, oh god, the jokes from their perspective they see me as this pretty Chinese girl who would not survive in such a brutal environment. It is a very brutal environment. They didn't think I would succeed, which I understood. I actually agree with them at the time, I mean looking back. But again, I understand that from their perspective but I had to do what was the best for me.

Participants found all of the challenges in finding a job concerning, given the need to find a job and start earning a living so that they could provide for themselves. Additionally, many were worried that if they were unable to find work, they would not be able to stay in Canada.

4.3 Perceived Career Opportunities

In this theme, we focus on what participants perceived their career opportunities to be at key points in the career trajectory, including the university-to-work transition. The comments centered on opportunities in Canada compared to home and other countries, job openings in Vancouver versus other major cities in Canada, the amounts of pay, status, and career progression opportunities, and the relative value of a Canadian education, in Canada and in their home countries. .

I think one thing Canada is lacking in general is—more in Vancouver than in Toronto—it is going to sound strange for one of the countries that accepts the most immigrants in the world—it's not international enough meaning that if you want to be in the centre of the world either you go to London or you go to New York. Toronto is better—Vancouver is definitely far away from everything else. If you want an international career I think it is a lot more difficult to obtain that in Canada.

For us sometimes we [international students] may seem we have more options because we can stay here, we can go home, but at the same time we may seem have less options compared to local students. They might travel for a year, they might do some just non-work related stuff after they graduate. If we want to stay, we have to find a job. If not, of course we can travel but we lose substantial opportunities to continue staying in Canada afterwards.

Some participants also spoke about diversity issues, such as the glass ceiling for women, which was perceived as higher or less of a barrier in Canada, as well as the relative merits or barriers as a bi-cultural, multi-lingual citizen of the world.

So being Chinese definitely gives me a lot more opportunities than local people because of the language—not just the language 'cause in order to work with Chinese you not only have to speak their language you also have to understand their culture because it's a completely different culture. So being Chinese with what I do right now, it definitely helps a lot 'cause now it just ended up that way.

I wouldn't be able to land in a similar type of position with the same pay in Japan. First of all the money spent per capita on research is way higher here in Canada. I guess Canada spends a lot more money and that is one of the reasons why I became interested in working in the health research because in Japan it is almost impossible to get a decent life right now, even if you are a PhD, post-doc.

Whether these perceptions are or were accurate according to the situation at the time is less relevant than understanding that international students appear to be using information they have heard or believe to be true to make important career decisions that arguably impacts the very trajectory of their careers.

4.4 Importance of Relationships

In this theme, we highlight how relationships old and new, from home and the destination country, were important on

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every level of the international experience, especially the transition from university-to-employment. Participants noted how important input from their key relationships was for their career decision-making.

Either I go back to China to find a job there or I stay here to try to find a job here, work a few years . . . combining all the discussions with my family and friends—well it turned out—the most supported idea was still to stay [in Canada] at least for a few years.

The range of participant responses included building a network with university and professional connections, developing peer relationships with international students and alumni, consulting with family and friends at home and in the host country, and establishing mentoring relationships throughout the duration of studies. In retrospect, the participants in this study recognized how important it was to cultivate a supportive network of relationships.

Right at the get-go. That's the thing, right. You can't think, "Oh my god, I'm in my fourth year so now I need to go make connections." No one is going to want to make connections with you and then you are going to be more stressed out."

Use your networks. Now, if you are international student in Canada, you do not have those networks. I was lucky because I managed to connect to a lot of people but I can say that a lot of international students chose to hang out with international students because it is more comfortable and you are looking for friends and they are looking for friends and you already have a common point. Whereas it is slightly more difficult to get involved with people who have been living here for a longer time because they already have established friend circles and you are going to be an addition let that be from the high school friends or childhood friends, it doesn't matter. So for an international student finding a job, it has to go through—the only way that they can find a job is through university.

Another participant noted how important it was for him to discuss career decisions with a support network: "I definitely consult with friends and colleagues and my boss and people who might know my circumstances a little bit better in terms of my options." The connection between career success and establishing relationships was summarized by participants through their recognition of the importance of networking:

Just from my impression, it's easier to create a network in Canada. You mentioned *guan-xi* is really important in China, which means, network is actually the most important thing to be successful in China. But ironically, it's hard to build that network in China because there are all blocks and set by… social standards, and those barriers are almost unbreakable but here everyone almost stands on equal grounds and you can go as far as you imagine yourself [to] go.

Every time I talked to students that are international students I told them to go do co-op, go to career services, go talk to people, go make connections . . . you need to start knowing people if you want to have full-time employment once you graduate.

University supervisors and mentors have tremendous influence on helping students transition from school-to-work, especially for their first job, due to connections and/or hiring ability, as well as developing relationships and establishing a professional identity. One participant emphasized the importance of mentoring relationships: "When I graduated, how helpful my mentor had been to me and actually gave me a job eventually. That really kick-started my career in Canada." Formal mentorship programs with international student alumni seem to be non-existent, and yet, our participants indicated that they would have found it very helpful to be mentored by these successful international student alumni. These findings point to the need for international students to establish long-term, authentic, and mutual relationships with friends, supervisors, and mentors in order to successfully transition from school-to-work.

4.5 Personal Growth and Discovering Strengths

This theme focuses on the participants' past reflections about their international experience in Canada and how they have grown and developed as a person because of it. Specifically, we highlight issues related to their philosophy, attitude, and personal characteristics, as well as how they changed, grew, and matured as persons. As one participant noted, "I have been able to grow and I feel like I am on my way to being my full potential." Another participant stated, "I think the destinations, they remind you that you're on your journey still, as opposed to, you know, I'm done, I've reached this point."

Personal characteristics and attitudinal examples sometimes touched upon the participants' roles such as adventurer, risk taker, someone who searches to learn and grow, while other times participants focused on areas of personal growth, such as increased confidence, more authenticity in relationships, capacity to relate to other people in informal and formal relationships, determination to see things through even when it is overwhelming, more of a certainty about life, competence as a leader, and feelings of accomplishment and success.

It's definitely not at the beginning. I think it's definitely after I broke out from my shell, then I realized it was a good

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decision. So when you're in a learning stage, you're taking in all the information. You couldn't really see the benefit of it, and it took experience and maturity to come to realize how valuable as a whole journey it has been, including the bad parts of when I was in school and it was so tough and homesick and all that. But when you're experiencing all that pain, it doesn't seem like the right decision, right? But it's definitely when you see the fruit, and then you realize, all the hard work that I've gone through, all the pain that I've experienced, without all that, I wouldn't be where I am today and that's when I realized that it has been a good decision all along.

I think it was going through information interviews and just meeting new people, finding contacts, connections, and building my confidence in that. Just feeling that I'm more mature and I'm taking my life into my hands—to some extent. I don't believe that I'm, you know, the only ultimate decision-maker in my life

Philosophical examples included how the experience was a journey, life just fell into place, the importance of serendipity, how you have to have faith that things will work out, that you don't always know, it all just worked out, and the experience of hardship leads to strength of character and perseverance.

The accumulation of this total Canadian experience helped to make me who I am today… It wouldn't have happened if I did not have the experiences that I've had so far. Some things have been very hard to overcome or deal with but what doesn't break you just makes you stronger.

For me it was really about getting a job and knowing that I can do well enough to hold down a job. As soon as I knew that I was like, "Okay, this is going to be fine because I know I like a lot of other things already so if I can make a living here then I am going to be fine here.

Overall, participants emphasized that despite the hard work, the barriers that they had to overcome, and the emotional lows, at the end of it all, they could see and appreciate the value of their international education, and the positive ways in which they had grown and matured over time. Their experiences as an international student was a journey that contributed to their career development, not only what they were doing at work, but also who they had become as people.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The transition issues experienced by international students change from the time of arriving to campus to when they are completing academic programs and transitioning into employment systems (Arthur, 2007). Programs and services designed to support international students need to take into account the shifting nature of academic and career issues in a fuller cycle of cross-cultural transition. This study has attempted to draw attention to international students' career-related needs as they complete their educational program and pursue employment.

Educational institutions have primarily been focused on the recruitment of international students and programs and services to support their initial transition adjustment. However, immigration policies in some destination countries are shifting to provide incentives to international students for permanent immigration (Arthur & Nunes, in press; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012). International students are highly educated people and, in countries with projected labour market shortages, they are considered to be a valuable source of human capital. A key implication is that educational institutions need to devote more resources to supporting international students with skills and experiences that will help them to enter the labour market of destination countries. It is not sufficient to recruit international students and encourage them to immigrate; this study adds evidence to previous findings that there are substantial barriers to overcome in making the transition from higher education to employment post-graduation (Arthur & Flynn, 2012; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Future research in different countries is needed to elaborate on the university-to-employment transition experiences of international students who pursue career goals in the destination country.

The results of this study suggest that participants experienced gaps between immigration policies designed to encourage international student employment, employment policies, and employer attitudes. Several of the international students in this study felt caught between rules of being hired and rules of immigration status, and were barred from employment in specific employment sectors. They also alluded to the preferential hiring practices of Canadian employers, many of whom were uninformed about employment policies that would support hiring international students; some employers were uninformed about the benefits of hiring someone with international experience; and some employers had biases and preferences for hiring local students. Several international students were caught in circumstances of shifting immigration policies and a downturn in the local economy that impacted the viability of pursuing employment. This is a reminder that the factors leading to international students' success are not entirely up to the individual; there are many factors at the macro level that influence career success. The career planning and decisions of international students are often made through comparisons between perceived career opportunities in their home country

compared to opportunities in the destination country (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). Consequently, concerted efforts are needed by educational institutions and employers to make staying in the destination country an appealing option for international students.

At the organizational level, the interface between career services within institutions of higher education and employers needs to be stronger. Employers need to be educated about the potential benefits of hiring international students and they need to be supported with information about employment policies and standards. In turn, international students require contacts for pursuing employment and pursuing a job search. Several international students in this study outlined the importance of making contacts and networking while they were a student, as a foundation for accessing employment systems post-graduation. Programs such as co-op work terms and internships help international students to gain valuable experiences, to find mentors, and to gain references through relationships formed in the workplace. Educational institutions can foster a stronger interface with employment systems by helping international students to understanding the benefits of work-placements and helping to facilitate their placements.

The key factor that international students in this study reported as supporting their career success was cultivating relationships. We have previously discussed how relationships are embedded in career decision-making and the importance of key relationships for international student success (Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2013). The current study builds on this discussion, showing that the informal and formal relationships developed by international students helped to navigate the barriers to career success. For example, participants discussed their career decisions with people close to them in their home country and in the destination countries; they sought advice from instructors and campus personnel; they consulted with other international students who had more experience and expertise about systems in the destination country; they established mentors; and they expressed gratitude to the employers who gave them a chance to make their career goals a reality. Relationships appeared to provide emotional support and guidance for making career decisions, instrumental help for gaining valuable work experience while a student and connecting with employers during job search, and role modelling about ways to pursue their career goals.

In conclusion, the international students in this study identified a multitude of barriers on the pathway to finding employment post-graduation. However, it was through developing relationships while engaged as an international student that they were able to overcome barriers and experience success. On the surface it may appear as if international students are independently making career decisions and pursuing their career goals. However, their success in making the transition from higher education to employment is strongly connected to the contextual influences of available opportunities and relationship support. What is striking from the stories of these participants is that the adversity they faced in overcoming perceived barriers was not defeating, but was framed as contributing to their sense of personal growth and development. They discovered personal strengths and applied them in the transition from their role as international students to finding employment and realizing their career goals to live and work in the destination country.

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