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# International Students' Perceptions of Their University-To-Work Transition

Woodend, Jon D.

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

International Students' Perceptions of Their University-To-Work Transition

by

Jonathan Daniel Woodend

A THESIS

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## Abstract

International students are increasingly seeking a foreign education. Part of this increase is due to institutional goals for revenue generation and for diversifying the student population. At the same time, governments of developed countries such as Canada are creating incentives for international students to work in the destination country post-graduation to fill skilled labour shortages. Post-study, international students often face barriers when integrating into the workforce, defeating these policies and decreasing the value of a foreign education. Moreover, researchers have predominately focused on the in-study experiences of international students, particularly their academic adjustment. Few studies have addressed the post-study experiences of former international students. In my doctoral thesis, I sought to help address this gap by investigating the post-study experiences of former international students, three to five years post-graduation. Specifically, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore how former international students in Canada made sense of their transition out of university and into the Canadian workforce. Guided by a Systems Theory Framework, I used the results to offer insights into the barriers these former international students faced, how they were able to overcome them, and the influences that were important to their workplace transition. Implications included suggestions for policy-makers, universities, and career practitioners to help international students successfully navigate the transition into and out of study. By supporting former international students in their post-study transition, practitioners can help with concerns such as un/under-employment, universities can help improve the value of education, and policy-makers may recruit highly talented workers to address labour shortages.

*Keywords:* international students, career transitions, internationalization, career development, interpretative phenomenological analysis

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To my parents: I am so proud of the amazing life you created, even though you started with almost nothing--it was always your story that inspired my passion to help newcomers.

Finally, to myself: this doctoral degree was not all roses and when it mattered the most, you did not quit, and you did not settle for less. It is okay to be proud of that, and I hope you remember in those future uncertain moments that feel scary and hard: you got this!

## Dedication

To my incredibly brilliant family, friends, colleagues, and mentors who challenged me to broaden my perspective and to deepen my understanding: I would never have set my sights so high if not for your patience, guidance, and wisdom. You helped to shape me and this doctoral thesis, thank you.

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### Epigraph

I raise up my voice — not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard. We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.

Malala Yousafzai: I Am Malala (2013)

## **Chapter 1: Research Context**

In 2010, I was working in Japan as an educator at a public high school. That year, my employer asked me to assist grade 11 students who were planning on studying in Australia, Canada, the U. K., or the U. S. A. to get ready for this academic transition and to mitigate as much culture shock as possible. Although I was to help primarily with their English language competence, much of our time together revolved around discussing their hopes, dreams, and expectations for their upcoming international experience. I remember being drawn to their stories, some about wishing to stay after their studies or venturing off to another country afterwards, while others already had ideas about how they would bring home these experiences to share with their family and community. As I heard about their excitement for this adventure, I sensed that they were also feeling anxious and nervous about transitioning to another country, with fears of being excluded or somehow failing to make the most of this opportunity and disappointing the school and their families.

We worked together for about six months before their departure. As the other support teachers and I wished the students farewell from the airport, I began to wonder about not only their transition into a new culture or their time in their respective locations, but also about what would happen next. At the same time, I was nearing the end of the contract in my own international transition and would soon face the choice of seeking further employment in Japan, returning “home,” or finding somewhere new to live. Reflecting on this time, I noted that there was a concerted effort to support these students and myself with our entry into, and adjustment in, a new location, yet little to no support as we considered next steps other than the anxious whispers of how “some people struggle” when moving on.

As I entered doctoral studies after living and working in Japan, and after experiencing my own version of “some people struggle,” my curiosity remained about the students I worked with and what their post-study experiences were like. Eight years have now passed since that day at the airport; yet, few studies exist that explore the post-study experiences of international students (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Nunes & Arthur, 2013), while the number of students seeking foreign education has increased dramatically over that same period (CBIE, 2016).

One of the goals I had during my doctoral degree was to investigate this gap in understanding regarding international students’ post-study experiences, and to start formulating ideas for best practices to support students as they move into their post-study lives. Part of this investigation included my involvement as a research assistant for Dr. Nancy Arthur, where we interviewed international students currently in-study about their perspectives of transitioning to post-study, as well as international graduates up to two-years post-study to learn about their experiences during and immediately following graduation. As I planned for my doctoral thesis, the next logical step was to understand more long-term adjustment, namely from two years to up to five years, post-study, which is a critical period as Canada offers international students a post-graduation work permit for two to three years post-graduation. During this period, international graduates can “test the waters” of the Canadian workforce and start the process toward permanent residency. As such, my doctoral thesis aimed to capture a snapshot of international graduates’ experiences and perspectives of entry and integration into the Canadian workforce, and their emerging long-term considerations for their work and life.

### **Key Definitions**

This section highlights key terms used throughout the dissertation in order to ground the reader in a common understanding.

**International student.** International students are people who have moved from their home country (i.e., country of origin) to another country (i.e., destination country) with the intention to seek a foreign education (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Specific to this dissertation, international students are individuals who have come to Canada to seek education. International students are a diverse, heterogeneous group, encompassing different, intersecting identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality), and who also seek education at different levels (Arthur, 2016). Some international students are in secondary school or earlier, while others are in post-secondary school (OECD, 2018). Post-secondary school consists of two subcategories including undergraduate and graduate level education (Gopal, 2016). In this dissertation, international students refer to those seeking a post-secondary level education (i.e., undergraduate and/or graduate level).

**Former international student.** In this dissertation, a former international student is someone who studied at the post-secondary level in Canada, but has since graduated.

**Internationalization.** Internationalization is debated term with different meanings in the literature (Knight, 2014b). Knight (2015, p. 2) posited that “internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education”. An aspect of internationalization that is important to this dissertation is student mobility; in particular, the role of inbound recruitment of international students to post-secondary institutions in countries with highly developed economies.

**Career.** For the purposes of this dissertation, career means the storied and sequenced development of individuals as workers (Swanson & Fouad, 2014). According to Blustein (2011), career is the culmination of intrapsychic factors (e.g., genetics, interests, personality), previous

experiences (e.g., academic history, previous jobs, volunteer activities, extra-curricular activities), and contextual influences (e.g., societal norms, geo-political contexts) across the lifespan that help shape individuals' choices regarding tasks and activities. This is in contrast to work, which is a more inclusive term representing tasks and activities that individuals may have little control or choice over but are necessary for survival (Blustein & Fouad, 2008).

### **Thesis Format: Declaration of Manuscript-Based Thesis**

There are five main chapters to this thesis and, as this is a manuscript-based thesis, I incorporated journal manuscripts into each of the chapters. In Chapter 1, I review the context in which the research took place and provide a general overview of the study through a published research-in-brief article. In Chapter 2, I investigate the literature surrounding the study through two manuscripts; in the first, I relate internationalization policy to implications regarding international students' career development. In the second, I detail historic to current trends within vocational psychology theories. In Chapter 3, I highlight the philosophical underpinnings and study design through a manuscript that evaluates the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore international career transitions. I also note the procedures that I followed in constructing and conducting the study. In Chapter 4, I present the study findings primarily through two manuscripts. In the first manuscript I included findings regarding the participants' experiences transitioning into and out of higher education, with implications for internationalization policy. In the second manuscript I focused on findings concerning participants' experiences transitioning from university into the workforce, with implications for career development and counsellors. Included in both of these manuscripts are ideas for what I believe are strengths and delimitations to the study, as well as future research. Finally, in Chapter 5, I conclude with a manuscript offering insights into my experience

conducting effective and appropriate research with former international students. In total, there are seven manuscripts included within this thesis and, before each one, I report the details regarding how I determined authorship and the journals targeted.

### **Manuscript #1**

In early 2017, the *Canadian Journal of Career Development* (CJCD) issued a call for a special issue specific to emerging scholars' research with the opportunity to submit a "research-in-brief" article for consideration. As I had already completed a preliminary literature review and data collection, my supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur and I decided to submit a manuscript that would serve as a "call to action" for career development practitioners and a preliminary snapshot of the study. In particular, this manuscript contains information regarding the study purpose, design, method, significance, and a cursory look into the findings. I obtained permission to reprint the manuscript from the editor of the journal (Appendix A). The reference for the manuscript published in CJCD in February 2018 follows:

Woodend, J., & Arthur, N. (2018). International students' university to work transition:

Research-in-brief. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 17(1), 53-55. Retrieved from <http://cjdonline.ca/download/international-students-university-work-transition-research-brief/?wpdmdl=909>



# International Students' University to Work Transition: Research-in-Brief



Graduate Student Research

## International Students' University to Work Transition: Research-in-Brief

Jon Woodend and Nancy Arthur  
University of Calgary

### Abstract

International students are increasingly seeking to attend Canadian educational institutions and the Canadian government has signaled its intention to make international students an important part of immigration policy. Yet, international students often face barriers when integrating into the workforce and many decide to return to their country of origin. In this paper we detailed the preliminary findings from the doctoral thesis underway by the first author, including the results from interviews with seven international students who graduated more than two years but less than nine years ago. We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2014) to conceptualize the study of how former international students transition to the workforce. The findings from this study offered insights into the influences that were important as they navigated immigration issues related to their transition to the workforce. Keywords: international students; university-to-work transition; post-secondary

### Introduction

Educational institutions are recruiting greater numbers of international students and immigration policy focuses on

retaining them as highly skilled immigrants (CBIE, 2014). The Canadian federal government implemented policies intended to attract educated immigrant workers and address skilled labour shortages (Denton & Spencer, 2009). In Canada and in other countries, such as Australia, international students are considered to be ideal immigrants because they often have international experience and credentials gained in their home countries, as well as credentials and education in the Canadian context (CBIE, 2014; Ziguras & Law, 2006). Presumably, international students should have a relatively easier time integrating into the Canadian workforce, but researchers have found many of the same barriers experienced by other immigrants in securing employment commensurate to their skill level, resulting in un/under-employment (Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Consequently, international students face a unique and complex education-to-employment transition related to their goals of employment and immigration to Canada. Beyond international students' initial adjustment experiences, few studies have explored their career development (Arthur, 2007; 2017). Particularly, there is a major gap in the literature about the resources needed to support their university-to-work transition. As such, the current study investigated the university-to-work transition experiences of international students in order to shed light

on complementary avenues for innovating career counselling, which, in turn, may help facilitate a successful workforce transition.

### Method

#### Theoretical Underpinnings

We used Systems Theory Framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014) to conceptualize this study and its findings, as it emphasizes the meanings individuals give to their career decisions, based on their past and present actions, as well as future aspirations. STF considers the cultural, societal, and familial context in which those decisions, actions, and aspirations take shape. For the research method, we selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA aligns with STF as we, the authors, conceptualize an individual's understanding of, and action in, the world as resulting from the reciprocal influence of the interaction between personal and contextual factors. Specifically, Smith et al. (2009) noted that IPA synthesizes both descriptive phenomenology (i.e., focusing on the way phenomena subjectively appear to individuals in their lived experience) and hermeneutics (i.e., understanding individuals' mindset and language that mediates these lived experiences). Additionally, IPA is idiographic in that it gives voice to single cases and their unique contexts. Given the focus and strengths of

STF and IPA, we determined the overarching research question was, how do former international students make sense of their university-to-work transition? More specifically, how do they make sense of the role of education and work in their lives through this transition?

### Participants

We recruited participants through university Career Services, social media advertisements (e.g., Facebook), and snowball sampling. To-date, we have interviewed seven former international students, including five women and two men, all of whom have been living in Canada for more than two, but less than nine, years post-graduation. We deemed this period as important in order to capture the transition experiences of those who are pursuing permanent immigration to Canada. Areas of country of origin included one from Africa, three from Asia, two from the Middle East, and one from South America. For highest level of education, three participants had a bachelor's degree and four had a master's degree. Fields of study were one each from construction, engineering, and finance, and two each from healthcare, and university administration. We recorded and transcribed the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

### Preliminary Findings

According to the analytic focus of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), the analytic process involved (a) noting initial impressions, (b) developing emerging themes, (c) looking for connections across themes, and (d) searching for patterns

across cases. Although there were many themes that emerged from participants' experiences, one of the key themes highlighted by all participants was their experiences with the immigration process. Participants anchored their experience during the time when they first sought their study permit to become international students in Canada. Participants differed greatly in their expectations of, experiences with, and ways of handling their immigration process, some having greater success than others. They shared in common the experience of being 'othered' by the immigration process; they were prohibited from fully joining the communities into which they were supposed to be integrating.

Specifically, Olivia recalled her frustration that the study permit limited her ability to work, which impacted her living conditions. Olivia explained that she quickly came to understand that many Canadians had the stereotype that international students were wealthy and she stressed how, in her case, she had worked for years beforehand to save for her education. For Olivia, working was essential to staying in Canada to study and as such she was constantly worried about lacking funds and needing to leave mid-study. Iris noted that it was not until she returned to university to complete a master's degree after working in Canada post-graduation from her undergraduate degree that she found out that she could not re-apply for the post-graduation work permit. As such, since graduating from her master's degree, Iris has been stuck in limbo, unable to work, waiting for her permanent residency application to be processed.

Shaun joined the workforce through the post-graduation work permit and was able to use this time

and experience to secure permanent residency and, eventually, citizenship. Yet, Shaun disclosed that regardless of being a citizen, he was one of the first people that his former employer laid off during economic downturn, while his Canadian-born, less educated, shorter-tenured, white-peers remained employed. Shaun reflected on whether he would ever really be considered Canadian or if people would continue to see him as an immigrant. In spite of the challenges found in these experiences, all participants reflected that, now, they could not envision living and working elsewhere. As Amber put it: "I can't imagine going back... the kind of freedom here... you can decide your life. So for me, I was fully integrated and this culture clicked with me... I'm more Canadian now than non-Canadian... I wouldn't recognize the old me."

An overarching interpretation of this dedication to staying in Canada is that these international students did not come to Canada for the single purpose of education; though their experiences, their sense of nationality and belonging transformed. This change in identity seemed to empower participants to persevere through the immigration process in order to remain in Canada.

### Implications and Conclusion

As the attention paid to the recruitment of international students increases in Canada and other parts of the world, the need for appropriate, relevant, and helpful career development services for international students will also grow (Arthur, 2017; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). The participants in this study reported facing additional transition barriers to the Canadian

workforce due to their precarious immigration status. As such, understanding the experiences of international students who are transitioning from university to work in the current economic setting is crucial to creating appropriate support services (e.g., immigration and career advice). As well, the participants in this study indicated having piece-meal information about the complex Canadian immigration system and wishing they had had greater guidance from knowledgeable sources. This is an area that career practitioners or other university services personnel might be able to address in their work with international students, particularly as university services are typically the point of contact for international students. Although this study provided preliminary insights into the experiences of international students as they move into the workforce, additional research is needed. For example, researchers could examine how international students prepare for employment while they are students, during the immediate years following graduation, and the influences on their decision not to pursue employment and/or immigration in the Canadian context. Research can inform education, workforce and governmental policies that support international students for inclusive integration into the Canadian workforce.

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**Summary**

In this first chapter, I reviewed my personal and professional connection to the topic of international students and their post-study career transition. As well, I declared that this is a manuscript-based thesis and outlined the general flow of chapters and the manuscripts that are included in each chapter. For Chapter 1, I included a research brief that served as an overview to the study background literature, theoretical underpinnings, method, and preliminary analyses. In Chapter 2, I will provide a deeper review of pertinent literature to contextualize further this study and its findings.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In moving forward with my investigation into international graduates' long-term experience of transitioning from university to work, there were two critical and foundational areas that struck me as essential to providing a framework to understanding this research and the resulting findings. The first foundational area was understanding an important contextual aspect that has resulted in the need to closely explore the experiences of international students, including their post-study experience. Historically, obtaining an international education was atypical, often sought by students who shared an ethnic and cultural background with the destination country, and/or was often temporary (i.e., the graduate would return to the country of origin; Bevis & Lucas, 2007). With an increase in globalization, higher education institutions have responded to this global market by adapting internationalization policies (Hawawini, 2016). One part of these policies is recruiting international students, which has created more diverse campuses (CBIE, 2018). The International Consultants for Education and Fairs (2014) indicated that this trend in recruitment and increase in international students attending foreign higher education institutions is likely to continue. Guo and Guo (2017) highlighted problematic aspects of internationalization policy that focus primarily upon recruitment of international students. Namely, international students are a diverse population and student support services currently in place may not appropriately address their needs as they are typically structured according to understandings and needs of domestic students. In understanding the experiences of the participants in my research, I felt it was critical to acknowledge the influences and resulting environment in which they lived these experiences. As such, Chapter 2 contains a manuscript that examines the positioning of international students and student support services in the age of internationalization policy.

The second foundational area was understanding career development theories and, in particular, their applicability with international students. For most research, the theoretical framework is often the first step in positioning the study historically and conceptually within the respective field (Swanson & Fouad, 2015). Based on my work with international students, who are a diverse and heterogeneous population (CBIE, 2018), I questioned the assumptions that career development theories were built upon, and if they would be appropriate in conceptualizing this international career transition. Many of the assumptions in prominent career development theories come from a historical and societal context that largely does not exist today and does not fit for many Canadian-born people, let alone individuals who experience an international career transition (Arthur & McMahon, 2019). At the same time, as a practitioner who has witnessed the utility of existing career development theories with diverse clientele, I appreciated the need to balance potential benefits and drawbacks of different conceptualizations in order to locate the most appropriate way to advance a client's wellbeing. Therefore, I wanted to review existing theories to determine which conceptualization would be the most appropriate fit for representing my participants' experiences before I started this research. As such, Chapter 2 contains a second manuscript that evaluates the applicability of career development theories with international students.

## **Manuscript #2**

I started planning the exact direction for this thesis research in 2014 and, during that time, nationalist and protectionist ideologies have dominated much of the global political environment. The populace in some major countries, most notably the United Kingdom and the United States of America, have supported disruptive political initiatives (i.e., Brexit, travel bans) that inevitably influence the availability and/or attractiveness of opportunities for international career

transitions (Chiose, 2018). For international students, this is a critical influence as, historically, these countries have been primary receiving countries of international students (ICEG, 2014). With many higher education institutions across the world engaging in competitive international student recruitment strategies that are counter to these political shifts (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016), governments and academia are seemingly at odds with each other. Interestingly, the Canadian government at this time did not follow these global trends and, instead, furthered their commitment to newcomers, naming international students as a particular priority to meet labour expectations because of their local education and experience (Government of Canada, 2015). The situation in Canada is remarkable then because the government and higher education institutions' agendas, in this respect, are aligned to be welcoming of international students. This alignment and welcoming environment could result in a larger number of international students considering Canada, with its similar academic standards, over historical receiving countries with unwelcoming political environments.

Given that this research happened in the Canadian context, I was curious to see if this would emerge in my discussions with the participants. Choudaha (2018) discussed that higher education institutions in the US have started to notice a decline in international student applications. I started to wonder about the post-study trend and if this shifting political environment was impacting international students' decision whether to stay in Canada or relocate. These wonderings highlighted the need to first explore the primary influence that is facilitating greater numbers of international students, internationalization policy, and connecting it to this research through its influence on how student support services have responded to address this diverse population's needs. As such, I created a manuscript that explores the

positioning of international students and student support services in the age of internationalization policy.

**Statement of contribution.** I independently created and wrote the original work in this manuscript, with the support of my primary supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur.



## Repositioning International Students and Student Support Services in the Age of Internationalization Policy

Jon Woodend

### Abstract

Higher education institutions have responded to an increasingly globalized market through the internationalization of campuses and policies. Although higher education institutions are succeeding at recruiting international students, there seems to be less follow through with the internationalization of curriculum and services. Inevitably, this disconnection creates situations where international students must assimilate to the institution, rather than a reciprocal adjustment. This is problematic as it ignores the responsibility of institutions to be part of this dynamic interplay inherent within internationalization policy. A key area where this disconnection manifests is in student support services; the student-facing personnel of higher education institutions. To draw attention to this area, this article reviewed current understandings regarding internationalization and the position of international students, and student support services within it. As well, the article explored critical next steps to help inform research and best practices for student support services.

Keywords: internationalization; international students; student support services

### Overview

The technological advances in transportation, communication, and artificial intelligence in the last few decades have driven globalization, making international partnerships, mobility, and influence easier (de Wit, 2011). Globalization has created a world market in which there are a greater number of competitors seeking a wider range of consumers (Knight, 2014b). Higher education institutions have responded to this global market through the internationalization of campuses and policies (Altbach & Knight, 2012). The idea is that internationalization will give the institution global branding, make it more competitive, turn it into an influential player on the world stage, and meet international quality standards for education (Knight, 2014a).

Although higher education institutions are succeeding at recruiting international students, one component of internationalization policy, there is a growing recognition that other elements of these policies are not receiving appropriate attention and follow through (Guo & Guo, 2017). This selective disconnection between policy and action is creating situations in which international students are being marketed a global education and then entering institutions where they are solely responsible for integrating into an existing system (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). When, inevitably, international students experience difficulty in this integration, the common ethos seems to be to adapt a deficits view of international students (Jones, 2017). This is problematic as it ignores the responsibility of institutions to be part of this dynamic interplay inherent within internationalization policy. A critical area that is integral to the success of international students and where this disconnection is evident is in student support services, as it is the student-facing arm of the institution (Smith, Whiteside, Blanchard, & Martin, 2016).

As global influences that shape policy change rapidly (Hong, 2018), it is important to consolidate understandings to date in order to inform exploration of critical next steps. As such, in this article, there is a brief summary of the emergence and current influence of internationalization policy, followed with a review of the role of international students in internationalization policy. Finally, there are suggestions for potential next steps for exploration in order to help with addressing this disconnection.

### Globalization to Internationalization Policy in Higher Education

Globalization is a controversial term described as “economic, political, and societal forces” increasing international involvement (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 290). Part of this controversy is that it originates in colonial ideology that creates taken-for-granted truths that disproportionately favour western countries (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Included in this taken-for-granted truth is the idea that the influences of globalization are outside the control of individuals, and for many is a force of change that needs to be accepted, and worked within rather than against (Dewey & Duff, 2009). This force of change has impacted higher education, often in the form of internationalization policy (Hong, 2018).

Internationalization is a less agreed upon term (Nussbaumer, 2013); however, Knight (2015, p. 2) posited that “internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education.” Hudzik (2011) added that internationalization “shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire education enterprise. It is essential that it be embraced by institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students and all academic and support units” (p. 1). An important aspect of internationalization is that, unlike globalization, it is considered to be within the control of institutions and the individuals therein (Dewey & Duff, 2009). As a result, internationalization policy, if it is adapted in higher education, can look differently depending on the institution, or even departments within an institution.

The adaptation of internationalization policy by a higher education institution depends upon the overall institutional aims. The motivation to adapt internationalization policy can be understood in either academic or economic motives. Specifically, academic motives included a) fulfilling the institutional education mission, b) maintaining academic relevance, and c) enticing skilled students and staff. Economic motives included a) increasing overall financial resources, b) mitigating risk by diversifying geographical resources, and c) providing revenue for the main institution operations (Hawawini, 2016). Adding to these academic motives are political motivations, such as cultivating soft power, which influence the adaptation of internationalization (Hong, 2018). Once adapted, internationalization policy typically includes action in four key areas including a) post-secondary institutions having international collaborative activities (e.g., multinational research projects); b) student mobility (e.g., international/exchange students); c) delivering programs and/or courses in international settings; and d) incorporating global dimensions to curriculum (Knight, 2008).

Proponents of internationalization insist that these areas provide a necessary response to globalization and advance education through creating global competency (Dewey & Duff, 2009), which is “having an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside one’s environment” (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006, p. 270). This competency supposedly equips institutions and individuals to effectively navigate a globalized society. Opponents of internationalization point out the disconnection in policy to action, namely in the lack of incorporation of global dimensions to curriculum (Nada, & Araújo, 2018). This disconnection is partially due to faculty indifference to incorporating global components as there are often no incentives for doing so from administrators, who emphasize different areas for faculty focus (Dewey & Duff, 2009). As well, some worry about the potential dilution of reputation, due to the demands to support an overseas campus and staff often prefer to be located in the same area and have proximity to collaborators, rather than being relatively isolated in a

satellite campus (Hawawini, 2016). Furthermore, institutional and regulatory barriers (e.g., differences in agenda between departments and higher administrator; securing governmental permissions) can impede the actualization of internationalization policy and the motives for adapting it (Hawawini, 2016).

Notably, although internationalization consists of different areas, it is often (mis)understood as primarily relating to international student mobility (Hawawini, 2016). In fact, the ratio of international students attending an institution is regularly considered to be a key factor in determining an institutions' degree of internationalization comparatively to others (Larbi & Fu, 2017). This is likely due to the easily quantifiable visibility of international students on campus, as well, this seems to be one area in which administrators have focused their efforts in enacting internationalization policy. To understand why this is the case involves an exploration of the positioning of international students within higher education institutions.

### **International Students in Internationalization Policy**

International student mobility is a key aspect of the internationalization policy of many universities (Knight, 2014b). Specifically, universities have made recruiting international students a critical part of their enrollment targets. There are three key reasons for this recruitment. First, international students typically pay higher tuition and fees than domestic students, which serves to supplement institutional revenue. This is important given that governmental funding continues to decrease, forcing higher education institutions to seek alternative sources of revenue (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). Second, international students tend to be a more heterogeneous group compared to domestic students, which serves to diversify campuses. This diversification is seen as important as it provides international talent and ideas that help to support institutions' reputation as global leaders (Hawawini, 2016). Third, international students, when they graduate, can also then be ambassadors for these institutions and help perpetuate their influence academically and politically on the global stage. This influence is critical in helping advancing other aspects of the institutional aims, such as securing international partnerships (Trilokekar, 2010).

Policy can be a way of communicating an idyllic society with the goal of guiding actions toward it (Hong, 2018). For internationalization policy, this includes the idea that, along with the benefit to institutions of having international students attend, international students also benefit from the attendance (Knight, 2003). This suggests that while there should be some adjustment on the behalf of international students to the institution, there should also be some reciprocal adjustment by the institution. This dynamic interplay is related to the concept of global competency as both institutions and international students are expected to operate in complementary and globally-minded ways (Dewey & Duff, 2009). Typically, however, this aspect of internationalization policy is not a priority of institutions and faculty (Guo & Guo, 2017), which has implications for current trends in the internationalization of higher education.

### **Current Trends**

Although the number of students attending international education institutions has increased dramatically in the past few decades, the competition to recruit international students has also intensified (CBIE, 2018). Consequently, many institutions have taken to marketing education as a commercial product or service that they can sell, offering different incentives for choosing their "product" over a competitor's (Rhoades, 2016). For instance, countries such as Canada have governmentally sanctioned programs to support international students staying and working in the country post-study, in order to entice international students from major receiving

countries, such as the USA and the UK (Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015).

Some researchers have expressed concern with this marketing approach as it reduces international students to “cash” (Stein & de Andreotti (2016, p. 226). Further, Stein and de Andreotti (2016) pointed to the directionality of benefit regarding student mobility. Specifically, higher education institutions in western countries are the overwhelming beneficiaries of student mobility, gaining international talent, revenue, and influence. Stein and de Andreotti cautioned that there is a vested interest in the marketing of western education as superior to that in developing countries and perpetuates colonialist ideology. This is particularly concerning given the discussed disconnection in the dynamic interplay between the institution and international students in terms of adjustment. That is, although institutions adapt an internationalization policy, if there is little or inadequate follow through with other areas (e.g., global curriculum) than student mobility, this implicates international students as being solely responsible for integrating into an already existing institutional structure (Nada & Araújo, 2018).

Important to note, much of the revenue generated by tuition from international students, instead of being invested into their academic experience, is often allocated to other areas of institutional focus, such as research or further recruitment (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). There is evidence that international students are recognizing this disenfranchisement and role as revenue, which is fostering discontentment with their experiences at higher education institutions (Guo & Guo, 2017). This experience is counter to primary academic aims (i.e., providing quality education) and should worry higher education institutions as it could impact their attractiveness and ability to continue to recruit international students; a population that institutions are increasingly depending upon (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). As the student-facing arm of higher education institutions, understanding the role of student support services in internationalization policy may provide insights into how this disconnection can be addressed.

### **Role of Student Support Services in Internationalization Policy**

Higher education institutions have an ethical responsibility to support international students (Arthur, 2016), and there is a need to shift focus of revenue generated by the presence of international students to student support services to assist in their integration and success while in study (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). Researchers in the past decade have focused on understanding the initial transition experiences of international students when they arrive, as well as the ongoing supports for when they are in studies (Smith, Whiteside, Blanchard, & Martin, 2016). Specifically, international students have concerns related to academics, accommodation, employment, finances, health and wellness, immigration, and socio-cultural transition. Recently, focus has extended beyond the initial and ongoing support needs to include the accompanying families of international students (Domene, 2016), as well as international students' post-study experiences (Woodend & Arthur, 2018). That is, some institutions have recognized their responsibility to expand some service provision to families (e.g., work visa support) and continue to offer services post-graduation (e.g., career support).

An important consideration is that there is considerable overlap between international students' concerns and those of domestic students (Jones, 2017). As such, treating international students separately from domestic students may create a false dichotomy that results in over-generalizations and creates unnecessary issues related to access of student services (Jones, 2017). Distinct services for international students could form unnecessary isolation from domestic students, while domestic students who are immigrants/recent citizens may need services provided solely for international students. At the same time, grouping domestic and international

students together might mask unique needs of international students and perpetuate a deficits based approach (Nada & Araújo, 2018). Instead, a more fundamental reconceptualization of supporting international students that incorporates the aspirational ideas of internationalization policy (i.e., global competency) is needed (Ammigan & Laws, 2018).

### **Future Directions**

Based on this current understanding of international students' experiences, there are four key areas of focus needed in future research, policy, and programming. First and foremost, institutions need to explore how to prioritize internationalization beyond recruitment of international students, including appropriately resourcing student support services (Smith et al., 2016). Linked to this, investigating how to create an institutional environment that shifts from a deficits approach in understanding international students' needs (Jones, 2017), to reconceptualising international students as a core part of the institution that is coherently and comprehensively linked to other parts (Nada & Araújo, 2018).

Second, institutions and student support services need to move past looking at what is needed for international students' integration and instead focus on how needs are being addressed (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). For student support services, this might involve examining the provision of services; that is, understanding how services are provided and determining ways to meet international students where they are at, rather than trying to force a fit (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). For example, instead of adhering to western ideas of individualism and being proactive, recognize and engage in more interdependent and scaffolded practice. This may help to create a dynamic environment of mutual adjustment, rather than assimilation (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012).

Third, there needs to be an evaluation of the structure of services, and the understandings upon which they were built in order to facilitate international students' access to appropriate services (Nada & Araújo, 2018). Typically, support services have operated with understandings based on the needs of domestic students, and specific services for international students are often adjunct to this core setup (Irudayam, 2016). As noted, this can create an unnecessary dichotomy between domestic and international students (Jones, 2017) and instead a focus on restructuring services for best practices with both domestic and international students is needed. For example, considering times of service operation based on when international students need these services (e.g., wellness support after typical business hours). Again, rather than enforcing assimilation, these types of considerations acknowledge the contextual influences relevant to international students in a mutual adjustment (Smith et al., 2013).

Finally, institutions need to grapple with the scope of responsibility to support students not only before and during study, but also after graduation. The post-study transition out of the institution is less explored than the initial transition into the institution, yet this is often a critical period when students, turned graduates, need support to be successful in their future endeavours (e.g., immigration, employment; Scott et al., 2015). A critical question in need of answering then is: is it, at least partially, the continued responsibility of higher education institutions to support these graduates who are not (yet) eligible for supports set up for immigrants or citizens? Connecting the loop of internationalization policy through these key areas is imperative to creating campuses that reflect reciprocal adjustment is critical to international students' well-being as higher education institutions are typically the primary resource available to international students (Smith et al., 2013).

### Conclusion

Higher education institutions have responded to the influences of globalization by adapting internationalization policies (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Part of these policies is the recruitment of international students, which institutions have prioritized relative to other elements of internationalization (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). This disconnection between policy and action has created situations where international students are positioned as revenue for institutional well-being without proportionate consideration for their needs. As higher education institutions continue to compete for the recruitment of international students, it is important that they shift priority to student support services that incorporate international students comprehensively in provision and access (Irudayam, 2016). In doing so, both institutions and international students will be engaging in actions that seek adjustment to each other, rather than a one-sided assimilation. This reciprocal engagement in adjustment may help address growing international student dissatisfaction in their academic experience, and create attractive campuses for future international students (Guo & Guo, 2017).

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**Manuscript #3**

Adding to the understanding of the global and institutional influences that have resulted in an increase in the number of international students and consequent gaps in service provision, I thought it was important to delve deeper into one area of service provision: the influence of career development on international students' experience. This strikes me as important given my experience as a career development practitioner and witnessing the ways in which career, or lack thereof, can affect lives. Clients I would work with would typically consider career to be separate from their personal life; however, through discussion, it was often an aspect that was interconnected with their presenting concern, and could be a powerful influence on how they sought to change or move through difficulties, toward a more preferred experience in their life.

In particular, according to Blustein (2011), career means the storied and sequenced development of individuals as workers. Specifically, career is the culmination of intrapsychic influences (e.g., genetics, interests, personality), previous experiences (e.g., academic history, previous jobs, volunteer activities, extra-curricular activities), and contextual influences (e.g., societal norms, geo-political contexts) across the lifespan that help shape individuals' choices regarding tasks and activities. This is in contrast to work, which is a more inclusive term representing tasks and activities that individuals may have little control or choice over but are necessary for survival (Blustein & Fouad, 2008).

Given the centrality of career in many people's lives, it is critical to understand the theoretical foundations upon which the field exists, as well as the historical influences that shaped these foundations. In discussing the history of the field, Savickas and Baker (2005) noted that the concept of career had its inception during the industrial revolution. The authors further explained that, as traditional, patrilineal work roles began to break down, people started to

migrate to cities, and machines replaced some menial labour tasks, large companies formed, specifying work positions with assigned tasks. Unemployment within these large cities became an issue as it often led to crime, which necessitated the earliest form of career development focused counselling. As an emerging field of career development, one of the pioneering minds was Frank Parsons, who sought to improve the lives of people from low socio-economic backgrounds through vocational service. Parsons' focus in career counselling was threefold; first, clients should have a clear understanding of their personal interests and abilities. Second, clients should understand the skills, both personal and professional, necessary for different occupations. Third, clients should use reason to determine how their personal interests and skills reconcile with the requirements of the occupations, which will result in a career choice. This matching between personal attributes and occupation requirements, called Trait-and-Factor Theory, is a concept that greatly influenced early career development theorists and researchers, with lasting impact on societal perceptions of "correct" career choice (Gysbers, Heppner, & Johnston, 2014).

According to Lent and Brown (2013), subsequent historical events also influenced the direction of the career development field. Specifically, the World Wars necessitated assessments that would allow the military to quickly determine roles for recruits that would maximize productivity and utility of personnel. Additionally, the Great Depression saw many people move into unemployment, which resulted in public career counselling in order to rehabilitate large portions of the population back into employment, largely into different positions than people previously held. Presently, technological and subsequent global market changes have influenced career counselling, with many struggling to navigate the transition from the previous world of work, to the one emerging (Blustein, Duffy, Kenny, Gutowski, & Diamonti, 2019). One key change is that individuals can rarely expect to remain with the same employer for their lifetimes

and instead will likely hold several different positions, possibly in a variety of fields. In response to this change, career development researchers and practitioners have started to shift from theories regarding a static interest-to-skill fit, although still prominent, to more comprehensive conceptualizations emphasizing adaptability and contextual influences (Pope, 2015).

Another key area of change, mentioned previously, is the increase in international career transitions. This change has created diverse populations with complex international and cultural influences (Arthur & McMahon, 2019). In reflecting on this change, I remembered my father's career transition from the UK to Canada, mine from Canada to Japan and then back to Canada, and that of the students I worked with in Japan who were going to attend foreign post-secondary institutions. Although they were all international career transitions, the diverse contexts created questions about how they could be understood. As a research-practitioner I was curious about how I might appropriately conceptualize these diverse experiences in order to work effectively with participants or clients. I wondered about the utility of the theories of career development I learned throughout my master's degree, concerned about either uncritically adhering to established understandings, or entirely rejecting meaningful contributions of understandings investigated in different historical contexts.

To address this second critical area, and to ground my theoretical conceptualization of my participants' experiences, I included a manuscript that reviews and critiques prominent career development theories, according to their applicability with international career transitions. For this manuscript, I targeted researchers and practitioners in the career development field. I based this manuscript on my Field of Study paper for my candidacy exam.

**Statement of contribution.** I independently wrote the original work in this manuscript with the support of my primary supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur. This manuscript has co-authorship due to the collaborative conceptualization of the ideas between Dr. Arthur and myself.

## Evaluating the Applicability of Career Development Theories with International Students

Jon Woodend & Nancy Arthur

### Abstract

Post-secondary institutions are increasingly recruiting international students, which is creating diverse campuses. In this context, career development practitioners and researchers need appropriate and relevant understandings and practices to be helpful to this heterogeneous population. Through these innovations, the career development field can continue to evolve in step with the increasing mobility of populations who seek to improve their career options through international education. To date, however, career development theories based in western perspectives continue to dominate the field, which may provide a disservice to international students. To help address this potential mismatch in theory to experience, the current article outlines prominent career development theories and evaluates their applicability with international students. Although each of the selected theories had benefits, there were also critical drawbacks in capturing international students' career development. The article concludes with implications for best practices and future research to continue this evaluation.

Keywords: international students; career development theories

### Introduction

The field of career development has evolved significantly since its inception and has seen different theories shift in and out of influence (Savickas & Baker, 2005). Consensus in the field previously was that career choice was a static event; whereas, recently, emerging perspectives of constructivism and social constructionism have moved the field into considering a wider array of dynamic influences on career development (Patton & McMahon, 2016). At the same time as this evolution, economic demands have resulted in an increasingly globalized world, with developed countries gaining a diverse population largely through international career transitions (OECD, 2018). This increase in international transitions and diversification of the workforce is necessitating a review of the taken-for-granted ways in which practitioners conduct career counselling as traditional career development theories do not seem to appropriately capture the experiences of many diverse individuals (Flores, 2014; Pope, 2015). One population for whom this review is particularly important is international students, a heterogeneous group who face complex career development concerns (Arthur, 2016).

The career development of international students is gaining interest with career practitioners and researchers because of the dramatic increase in the number of international students attending post-secondary institutions, from a quarter of a million students in the 1960s to over five million in 2014 (CBIE, 2018). Moreover, ICEF (2014) predicted that by 2020, there will be over seven million international students worldwide, as a result of many academic institutions aggressively recruiting to increase their share of international students on campus as a key part of their internationalization strategy (Geddie, 2015).

Although international students are living and learning in a different country, in terms of career development, they share many of the same concerns as domestic students in the goal many have to improve their future employment prospects. These concerns include a) experiencing independence (e.g., away from family, having romantic relationships; b) dealing with contention between personal and parental opinions; c) choosing a degree and major; d) worrying about future employability; and e) existing within societal norms (e.g., gendered majors/jobs; Renn & Reason, 2012).

At the same time, international students face unique influences. These influences can

include, a) adjusting personally and academically to the destination country; b) dealing with linguistic differences (e.g., lower English language abilities; c) lacking a local social network; d) experiencing discrimination; e) having greater freedom in career choices; and f) deciding whether to remain or return to home country post-graduation (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Tas, 2013). For many graduate level international students, who tend to be older, there are more possible factors, such as balancing the contention between studying and supporting their family, relinquishing previous professional identities to pursue further education, and having greater family obligations as parents age (Gopal, 2016). Although not an exhaustive description of international students' career development, these factors demonstrate the complexity involved when working with this diverse population.

Career practitioners at post-secondary institutions expressed challenges in appropriately supporting many international students in their career development (Woodend, 2018). Namely, there seems to be a disconnection between the underlying tenets of current career theories and the presenting concerns and cultural contexts of international students. Specifically, most theories come from a Western, English-speaking perspective, which emphasizes individualistic, aspirational career goals and motives, and has little to no consideration for employability, skill, or other contextual influences in career choice (Flores, 2014). Researchers have noted that these beliefs are not consistent with all individuals in Western, English-speaking countries (Pope, 2015), and that the gap in capturing international students' perspectives is even wider (Arthur, 2016).

Beyond recruitment by academic institutions, policy-makers are recognizing international students' local education and experience as an advantage to their ability to integrate successfully into the workforce, relative to other newcomers (Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). However, in reality, many international students struggle with unemployment and underemployment (Scott et al., 2015). When career practitioners and researchers assume existing career development theories are applicable with international students, then they run the risk of reaching inappropriate conceptualizations, and, consequentially, creating and using ineffective interventions and programs.

To help evaluate these assumptions, in the current article, there is first a review of a categorization of career development theory ideologies and a prominent theory within each category in order to illustrate the category. After having this content understanding, there is an examination of these and their applicability with international students. Finally, there are implications for career practitioners and researchers, as well as future research avenues to further this evaluation.

### **Prominent Theories of Career Development**

To address this gap, this section contains a few examples of prominent career development theories. With numerous career development theories in practice, Patton and McMahon (2014) suggested organizing theories by (a) content; (b) process; (c) content and process; and (d) constructivist and social constructionist themes. This organization is helpful as it largely, but not exclusively, follows the evolution of theoretical thought within the field, illustrating the historical underpinnings as well as the current standpoint. In this section, there is an outline of each category of theory before describing an example of one prominent theory from each category. Although this is not an exhaustive list, by showcasing a prominent example of theory from each category, the intention is to then explore the applicability of these ideologies to international students. The selected theories in this article included the Theory of Vocational

Personalities (Holland, 1997), Life Span, Life Space Theory (Super, 1953), Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, 2013), and the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2014).

### **Content Theories**

In content based theories, there is a focus on an individual's intrinsic qualities, such as interests, values, attitudes, and personality, and how these qualities determine the career choices an individual will make. Based on Frank Parson's Trait-and-Factor Theory, content based theories are among the most prominent theories used by practitioners (Lent & Brown, 2013).

**Theory of Vocational Personalities.** Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities in the work environment has been one of the most influential career theories in the past century and it has formed the basis for the most frequently used career assessments, such as the Strong Interest Inventory (Nauta, 2010). Holland (1997) posited that one can systematically classify career interests into typologies. Holland noted that these typologies reflect individuals' personalities as making a career choice is an expression of one's personality. Holland further believed that he could classify work environments into parallel typologies that reflect the characteristics of the occupation. The assumption Holland based these typologies on was that particular personalities are drawn to specific work environments, and that the congregation of these personalities shapes the occupation. In accordance with Trait-and-Factor Theory, when the career interest typology and the work environment typology match then Holland indicated that there is congruence. When congruence is high, the individual will be satisfied with their occupation, while low congruence indicates dissatisfaction.

There are six typologies of career interests (Holland, 1997; Nauta, 2013). First, the artistic type is someone who is creative and would be suited for occupations such as graphic design. Second, the conventional type is someone who is organized and straightforward, seeking occupations such as administrative assistant. Third, the enterprising type is someone who is able to persuade others and would fit with occupations such as politician. Fourth, the investigative type is someone who thinks critically about concepts and would be suited to occupations such as a professor. Fifth, the realistic type is someone who prefers using their hands and could fit in occupations such as carpentry. Sixth, the social type is someone who is inclined to help others and would prefer occupations such as a psychologist. Typically, individuals have a primary, secondary, and sometimes tertiary typology. It is important to note that these typologies represent the self-described interests of individuals but not their aptitude or skill (Nauta, 2010).

### **Process Theories**

In process-based theories, researchers and practitioners conceptualize career development as a continuous, incremental process that unfolds over time, based on individuals' maturity and career experiences. The rise of process-based theories came in the 1950s as experimental psychology was focusing on theories of human development and researchers started to view career development as a choice that individuals begin formulating in childhood and into early adulthood before deciding (Patton & McMahon, 2014). What distinguished process-based theories from content-based theories is that process-based theories conceptualize career development as a dynamic rather than static event; career development is made and reshaped over the lifespan, rather than consisting of a singular choice (Lent & Brown, 2013).

**Life Span, Life Space Theory.** Super's developmental theory is among the most used career theories by practitioners and Savickas (2013a,b), a collaborator of Super's, has developed subsequent career theories (i.e., Career Construction Theory and the Life Designing Paradigm) based upon Life Span, Life Space Theory, demonstrating its continued influence within the field.

Super (1951) believed that career was an essential component to everyday life and that while matching was helpful, it did not address the changes individuals undergo as they mature. In Life Span, Life Space Theory, Super offered a complex conceptualization of career development where individuals make their self-concept manifest through their career choices. The self-concept is a way of viewing or understanding oneself. Individuals make choices in their lives, and subsequently careers, which are congruent with their understanding of themselves. Individuals develop their self-concept through the iterative interactions between their environments, the level of stimulation they perceive from the environment, mental and physical development, and experiences with success versus failure.

Hartung (2013) outlined the evolution of the self-concept, which occurs through five stages. The first stage is growth, which occurs between ages four to 13 and is where the occupational self-concept begins; individuals start thinking about the future, exercising control over their lives, developing work habits, and self-motivating to achieve academically. The second stage is exploration, which happens between ages 14 to 24. In this stage, individuals explore potential occupational paths before crystalizing around one area, specifying the occupation within the area, and then pursuing this career choice. In stage three, establishment, individuals between the ages of 25 and 44 enter and stabilize themselves within their chosen occupation through learning its specific requirements. Once individuals consolidate their learning and feel competent with their role, they seek to advance their position through increased responsibilities and compensation. The fourth stage is maintenance of management, which occurs between the ages of 45 to 64 and is where individuals hold consistent advancement within their occupation, updating their knowledge and innovating their skills as necessary. The fifth stage is disengagement, which occurs at age 65 and above, and involves retirement from work.

### **Content and Process Theories**

Theorists eventually looked past strictly content- and process-based theories and instead started using the two in tandem to create a more nuanced conceptualization of individuals' career development (Patton & McMahon, 2014). The third category of career development theories are content and process-based theories. In these theories, the onus is on matching qualities (i.e., interests, dreams, hobbies) of individuals with positions that share these qualities but also to consider career choices as a developmental process that occurs across the lifetime. A benefit of blending content and process into theories is that practitioners can then bring complex contextual influences, and how they change over time, into consideration when conceptualizing career development (Lent & Brown, 2013).

**Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).** Bandura (1997) proposed self-efficacy, through Social Learning Theory, which stated that individuals' abilities to complete a task or reach a goal was dependent upon their beliefs about their competence for completing it. Bandura proposed that there were three key concepts in Social Cognitive Theory. First, self-efficacy is an individual's subjective sense of competence from previous accomplishments with similar tasks. Second, outcome expectations are what individuals assume will happen if they undertake a specific behaviour. Third, personal goals are the intentions of individuals to engage in certain behaviours or to strive for a particular level of activity. From this theory, Lent, Brown, and Hackett created SCCT (Lent, 2013), which conceptualizes career choice behaviour as resulting from self-efficacy relating to previous career experiences.

According to Lent (2013), there are three interwoven development models in SCCT. The first model is the development of academic and vocational interests, which involves specifying



one's interests through efficacious activities that result in positive outcomes. Specifically, based on their self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations for particular behaviours, individuals form interests in those particular tasks. These interests in turn form goals pertaining to performance of those tasks, which leads to decisions around the future behaviours individuals will perform. The second model is how individuals make academic and occupational choices, which clarifies interests that are viable for the individual through performance feedback. In this model, individuals' contextual positions (e.g., ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status) influence the types of opportunities and experiences that are available to them and also which experiences are "appropriate" for them to have. Lent (2013) explained that the third model is the individuals' persistence in pursuing academic and career performance. Past performance informs individuals' self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations of a specific behaviour. In turn, these beliefs and expectations shape the performance goals that individuals set for themselves, which then determines the level of performance that individuals strive to achieve.

### **Constructivist and Social Constructionist Career Theories**

The fourth category of theories refers to those that have a basis in constructivism and social constructionism. Constructivism is the epistemological thought that humans create meaning of stimuli in the world through interactions with their environment and reflecting upon these interactions (Patton, & McMahon, 2016). From a constructivism viewpoint, there is not one objective or "correct" reality that everyone can experience, but rather there are multiple subjective realities, based on their individual cognitions, representing the differences between experiences. Social constructionism is similar but emphasizes that people make meaning of stimuli by negotiating and constructing meanings through their interactions with others. Specifically, in the context of culture and historical time, people use language to negotiate meaning of stimuli and experiences in the world (Stead, 2004). This shift to constructivist and social constructionist career theories was the result of practitioners and researchers recognizing the need to pay greater attention to contextual influences and follows a parallel shift in psychotherapy theories (Pope, 2015).

**Systems Theory Framework (STF).** Patton and McMahon (2014) cited work using a systems perspective in the fields of physics, biology, and anthropology as influencing STF. Specifically, they viewed STF as an integrated framework of human development. Instead of a traditional theory, they considered STF to be a meta-theory, which practitioners can use in conjunction with other theories. According to Patton and McMahon, STF focuses on the meaning individuals make about their career decisions. These meanings are influenced by the contextual factors in which they take place including time (i.e., the past, present, and future), and social positioning and culture (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, geographical location). Patton and McMahon (2014) explained that, by using STF, researchers and practitioners can conceptualize career development through content and process influences, both of which impact individuals and shape their career decisions. Content influences are intrapersonal variables, including individuals' personalities, interests, and values; they are similar to the constructs in content-based theories. Process influences are the recursive and iterative interactions that individuals have with others (e.g., family and friends) and their environment (e.g., workplace, geographical location).

Patton and McMahon (2014) described three interacting systems within STF. The individual system is the central most system, which includes factors such as individuals' age, gender, abilities, sexual orientation, and personality. Moving outward from the individual, there

are two contextual subsystems. The social subsystem involves the people with whom the individual interacts and how their respective systems interact and overlap with each other. The environmental/societal subsystem includes individuals' geographical location and socio-economic status. Finally, the process system includes aspects of time and chance, which happen across the individual and contextual systems. Together, these systems determine the career decisions individuals make by narrowing in on available opportunities and salient interests.

### **Applicability of Career Development Theories with International Students**

After describing the four main categories of career development theories in the previous section, this section shifts into an evaluation of the applicability of Holland's theory, Super's theory, SCCT, and STF in conceptualizing and supporting international students' career development. Specifically, the three criteria to evaluate the theories included a) transferability, b) pragmatism, and c) relevance.

#### **Transferability**

The first criterion is transferability, or the extent to which the foundational perspectives of the theories are applicable across cultures. Many of the theories come from Western, self-actualizing perspectives that may not represent the values of international students from different cultural backgrounds or their actual potential career prospects (Flores, 2014; Watson, 2019). Holland and Super both originally created their theories during a different social and economic period and climate (Nauta, 2013). That is, when Holland created his theory, white, heteronormative, able-bodied North American men were the workforce at that time (Savickas & Baker, 2005). As such, Holland's theory may not appropriately capture the experiences of individuals from non-dominant groups (e.g., women, people from non-White and diverse ethnic backgrounds) who may place less or have less opportunity to place value on matching interests (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2009). For example, perceptions of, or actual limitations in students' English speaking abilities, as well as work permit requirements and immigration status, may limit the occupation choices available to them (Scott et al., 2015). Holland's theory does not address these concerns in the occupations suggested, based on individuals' interests (Swanson & Fouad, 2015).

Additionally, SCCT does not account for changes in performance expectations that can be culturally or geographically dependent. For instance, in one country, an employer considers a worker exemplary because of his or her ability to defer to authority, while in another country, a different employer could perceive this same behaviour as the worker lacking the ability to be proactive and thus being unsatisfactory. In this case, previous experiences, outcome expectations, and goals may not translate over into the destination country, leaving international students at a disadvantage (Arthur, 2016). Similarly, although researchers have made updates to its concepts (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), Super's stages reflect a different era (Swanson & Fouad, 2015). Namely, Super (1953) constructed his theory in a period when international career transitions were not yet as common an occurrence as they are today. Again, for international students, who may have started and successfully mastered some of the developmental tasks, by moving over to a different country, the mastery of those tasks may not translate into this different context (Arthur, 2016).

Although there seem to be some foundational limitations in their applicability to international students' situations, for theories such as Holland's, Super's, and SCCT, researchers have investigated and provided evidence for their general applicability (Betz, 2008). For Holland's theory, researchers have provided evidence for matching individuals' interests with an

occupation that will fulfill their interests and that this does lead to some individuals having satisfaction with their job (Toomey, Levinson, & Palmer, 2009). In Super's theory, the consideration of developmental influences on interests, as these influences unfold over time, is useful in that it moves past career choice and provides conceptualization throughout the lifespan, considering both childhood and older adulthood (Salomone, 1996). In SCCT, Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is one of the most researched in the past 40 years, making it a thoroughly established foundation for SCCT (Lent, 2013). Likewise, with its interdisciplinary history, STF comes with a solid theoretical background to support its claims (Patton & McMahon, 2014) and a growing body of diverse research (e.g., Lee, McMahon, & Watson, 2018; McMahon, Watson, Foxcroft, & Dullabh, 2008).

Moreover, given the research providing evidence for or against components of these theories, researchers have made updates to many of these theories to better capture the current world of work (Swanson & Fouad, 2015). Holland's theory informed the Strong Interest Inventory, whose lists of potential occupations are constantly being updated to match current job market trends. At the same time, many training programs use Holland's theory, creating a near ubiquitous use or at least understanding of the theory, with a history of clinical practice behind it (Betz, 2008). In Super's theory, although it has evolved and remained impactful and relevant to concerns in the current world of work, a particular strength is that it has provided the basis for emerging constructivist and social constructionist theories (Savickas, 2013a). In developing SCCT and STF, Lent and Brown (2013) and Patton and McMahon (2014), respectively, made an attempt to address criticisms of existing career development theories such as being static (i.e., reduced to a single occupation choice) and focused exclusively on the intrapsychic characteristics of the individual.

Taken together, although the foundational elements may be incongruent with some international students' situations, there remain components that have merit and could be useful in making sense of their career development process.

### **Pragmatism**

The second criterion is pragmatism, or the degree to which the theories contain practical approaches to address international students' career development. Important to consider is that many international students, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, can have different ways of approaching concepts and even problem-solving (Flores, 2014). In more directive cultures, theories like STF present a different way of approaching career development that may be hard to grasp initially, given its broad approach (Patton & McMahon, 2016; Reid, 2006). That is, STF offers opportunities of exploration, but not definitive directions about occupations or career directions to pursue (Patton & McMahon, 2014), which can be frustrating for some clients, for example, who are dealing with career indecision in a second language. Similarly, although SCCT presents a nuanced approach to career development (Lent, 2013), its models are complex, with many terms that can come across as jargon to individuals outside the career development field.

Both the broad nature of STF and the complex nature of SCCT may be especially challenging if students have lower English-language abilities, requiring greater time commitment from career practitioners to explain the concepts and ensure that clients are agreeing with the approach to be used in designing interventions (Arthur, 2016). Notable, however, is that creators of both SCCT and STF have sought to address these criticisms. Specifically, in SCCT, the creators provided detailed descriptions with examples, as well as diagrams to help navigate the

various models (Lent, 2013). For STF, the creators attempted to address the lack of concreteness with STF-specific assessment tools to guide both the practitioner and the client through their exploration (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2015).

Comparatively to SCCT and STF, Holland and Super created theories that are relatively transparent as most of their concepts are easy to understand, and it is immediately apparent how the concepts could be applicable to individuals' lives. As such, Super's theory and Holland's theory may be helpful in bringing structure into sessions, which may fit better with international students from some cultures who tend to indicate a preference for working with a professional in counselling using directive, concrete, and specific intervention strategies and communication (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2009). In particular, Holland's theory, as it is prescriptive in its assignment of vocational types, engages students in a straightforward, transparent, and tangible process, with clear future directions for students to take (Spokane, Luchetta, & Richwine, 2002).

As for Super's theory, it is linked to developmental models in psychology, which means practitioners can use biological and psychological milestones to help directly guide career development conceptualization as individuals age (Schultheiss, Palma, & Manzi, 2005). Moreover, Super's theory helps practitioners to provide more long-term career guidance, as they can help international students envision their career development beyond the current moment and into future stages of their life (Super et al., 1996). For some international students, the sole focus is on doing well academically (i.e., grades), to the exclusion of other important career building ventures (e.g., volunteering; Woodend, 2018). This forethought might be helpful to international students, not only to improve their employability, but also to take into consideration the many future unknowns (e.g., immigration status, choosing to work in destination or home country).

In summary, some common components of these theories may not directly apply to international students' situations while others may illuminate areas that are underexplored.

### **Relevance**

The third criterion is relevance, or the level of significance the theory has in addressing international students' career development concerns. Many of the theories do not incorporate contextual influences and barriers as part of the conceptualization of career development (Flores, 2013; Pope, 2015). This is an important gap for international students who have at least two social contexts (i.e., home and destination country) to contend with in their career development (Arthur & Nunes, 2014). Researchers and practitioners have largely critiqued Holland's theory in particular for excluding contextual influences that may shape interests and for ignoring whether individuals have the associated skills and capabilities to choose an occupation that matches their interests (Nauta, 2010). As well, Holland's theory does not account for political and social climate, which has profound effects on international students' prospective career mobility in terms of limitations due to discrimination through anti-immigration thought in economic nationalism and protectionism (Scott et al., 2015).

Although SCCT does consider environmental and contextual factors (Lent, 2013), it holds these factors in the background as indirect influences on career development. That is, SCCT considers career development through an individualistic action lens that may not be in line with the views of international students from more collectivist cultures. For some individuals, career choices are made through a mutually determined process between individual and family or even society, with individuals acting not solely in their best interest. Here, the context is at the forefront while the individual is in the background (Leung & Yuen, 2012). SCCT theorists also make assumptions, in particular, that if individuals are good at a specific behaviour and the

outcome expectations meet their goals, then individuals will develop an interest in it (Lent, 2013). Although someone may be good at a task, it does not necessarily mean that they enjoy the task or find it interesting. For instance, sometimes individuals can feel bored or resentful toward tasks that they find easy and extrinsically rewarding and instead choose tasks that are challenging, possibly outside their realm of capability, and that others may oppose. Moreover, SCCT does not address societal messages around tasks that certain groups are stereotyped as being skilled or unskilled at (e.g., women are “good” at mothering but have a “bad” sense of direction) may not match individuals interests or actual abilities (Betz & Schifano, 2000).

As for Super’s theory, it makes assumptions to the exclusion of other influences, such as that there is a mostly linear and continuous progression through the stages, and does not account for pauses due to events such as child birth, geographical relocation, and injury, among others (Herr, 1997). Relatedly, individuals are less likely to remain in the same position, or even with the same organization throughout their working life, creating a cyclical return to exploration and stabilization stages rather than continuation into the maintenance stage (Lent & Brown, 2013). Moreover, Super’s developmental stages and tasks can look different across countries and cultures (Stead & Watson, 1998). For example, the age of adulthood varies across countries, with people in developed countries typically having a longer emerging adulthood than people in developing countries, especially those from a lower socioeconomic status, who may not have an emerging adulthood (Tanner et al., 2010).

At the same time, Holland’s theory and SCCT may highlight aspects of international students’ career development that the students had not considered previously. Holland’s theory, through the use of the Strong Interest Inventory, provides a thorough list of currently relevant occupations that the student may not have previously considered (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2009). SCCT, through its focus on previous successful and unsuccessful experiences, highlights avenues for career exploration (Thompson & Dahling, 2012). This list of occupations and potential avenues would be important if the student had entered post-secondary with a specific area in mind but, throughout their studies, discovered that this area was not a fit and needed guidance about other areas to pursue (Arthur, 2016). This is particularly useful for some international students who, in discussion with their families, may have defaulted to certain professions before exploring options and abilities.

As well, SCCT does take into account social positioning and how environments influence the beliefs, expectations, goals, and subsequent actions individuals take (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003). This is important for international students, who may be coming from different cultural backgrounds and value systems to those of domestic students (Leong & Gupta, 2008), as SCCT does not inherently privilege one group’s value system over another (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2013). As well, SCCT does not follow any set, continuous developmental stages, but instead suggested repeated engagement in its models as individuals live their lives (Lent, 2013). This back-and-forth through the models is important for international students who may have a disjointed career development experience due to their international transition (Arthur, 2016).

Similarly, STF offers a complex and nuanced approach to conceptualizing career development, considering not only interests or mastery of developmental tasks, but also beliefs, previous experiences, contextual influences, time, and chance (Patton & McMahon, 2014). For STF in particular, it seems to address concerns of cultural bias by having multiple layers of individual and contextual systems that interact in a recursive manner to determine career

development outcomes (Patton, 2015). In this way, individuals and/or the environment in which they live their lives shift from foreground to background, as they become salient to individuals' needs. This creates counselling and career development conceptualization that is pertinent and relevant to clients (Patton & McMahon, 2006b). That is, STF honours the diverse backgrounds of the heterogeneous population of international students; thus, instead of enforcing a particular perspective on international students, STF meets students where they are and provides a conceptualization that is relevant to their particular situation (Patton & McMahon, 2014). As researchers and practitioners alike have identified that typical career counselling is sometimes insufficient for helping international students who may have different needs than domestic students (Vultur & Germain, 2018), STF offers opportunities to reveal the concerns that are salient to international students and create counselling goals that are meaningful to them (Patton & McMahon, 2006b).

Overall, the evaluation of transferability, pragmatism, and relevance for these selected prominent career development theories showcased that although there are useful components, there are also key contraindications. Indiscriminate use of these theories could result in an inappropriate conceptualization or intervention, and, at the same time, completely disregarding these theories could exclude important areas of exploration that are pertinent to international students' career development.

### **Implications for Practitioners and Researchers**

Based on this review and analysis of prominent and emerging career development theories, as well as the complexities of international students' career development, there are four main implications for career practitioners. First, practitioners need to be aware that many of the traditional theories have an inherent cultural bias for Western, European values (Pope, 2015). Flores (2014) examined the assumptions that are prevalent in the career development field, noting their influence from six tenets within Western, European values. These assumptions include a) universality, b) individualism, c) affluence, d) openness of opportunity, e) centrality of work in life, and f) linearity. This means that these theories emphasize and focus on aspects of career development that are more in line with the values of individualistic and capitalistic cultures, sometimes to the exclusion of alternative perspectives (e.g., collectivistic). For diverse individuals (e.g., women, people of colour, LGBTQ+, different ethnicities and their intersections in identities), this bias may not appropriately capture the factors that are both pertinent and salient to their situation, such as systemic discrimination (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2009, 2013).

This is particularly the case for international students, who are a diverse group (CBIE, 2018; ICEF, 2014). For practitioners, simply updating or adapting theories may not be an effective option as it can still play into ethnocentrism (Flores, 2014; Leong & Gupta, 2008; Leung & Yuen, 2012). At one extreme, by using a culturally inappropriate theory to conceptualize career development, practitioners run the risk of perpetuating unjust practices, while at the very least providing the disservice of unhelpful information and guidance (Sampson, Dozier, & Colvin, 2011). As such, researchers and practitioners need to be mindful of the theories they are using to conceptualize individuals' career development and in particular to the benefits and limitations in using theories with diverse populations (Arthur & McMahon, 2019). Relatedly, given the diversity of the international student population, finding one theory that fits all may not be possible. Distilling a multitude of identities and situations into one theory is reductionist, describing career development in broad strokes, rather than in fine detail. For practitioners and clients, this may result in missed opportunities for career development

directions that working with greater detail might have uncovered (Patton & McMahon, 2014).

A second implication is that career practitioners need to keep in mind is systemic and structural barriers that may be limiting international students' career development options and that are not part of the conceptualization of many of the traditional theories (Arthur, 2016). To address this, career practitioners could work with international students using STF to identify influences that need to be explored to reveal options, for example, directing them to find out more information about their work permit and immigration options. This information then works in a recursive way to influence other systems. For instance, based on the work permit information, practitioners could then work with international students to explore their ideas around where they would like to work in the future. Furthermore, career practitioners need to be mindful of other barriers, such as low English language fluency (Scott et al., 2015; Tas, 2013). Practitioners might work with international students with low English fluency to make materials and theory explanations more accessible. As well, practitioners could help find ways to improve their language skills, and to keep students from foreclosing on desirable career options.

A third implication is that theories do not account for practical knowledge gaps regarding the workplace. There is an assumption that individuals will learn with their cohort about workplace norms; however, for international students, they may not have learned, for example, about how to write an effective cover letter, a norm that may not exist in their home country (Vultur & Germain, 2018). Practitioners need to step out from career development theories and recognize, identify, and supplement any gaps in practical workplace learning, even if this knowledge seems common sense to the practitioner. Relatedly, many of the theories do not account for this dual learning process that is occurring. Specifically, international students have started learning about the workforce in their home country (e.g., through watching parents' career paths) with knowledge pertaining to that context (Lee et al., 2018). In the destination country, some of this knowledge may not translate over to this new context, requiring learning new norms, but also, international students may then have two sets of workforce norms and cultural values that are influencing their career development (Scott et al., 2015). In counselling, practitioners cannot assume that international students will stay in the destination country or return to the home country, but instead may need to help students advance both potential paths (Arthur & Nunes, 2014). This can be complex and challenging for practitioners, who may not be aware of the job market, and the workplace norms and cultural values of the home country.

A final implication is that, although many of the theories present challenges in working with international students, there are still helpful components within them. For instance, Holland's theory can highlight potential interests for international students that they may not have considered otherwise (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2009). Super's theory might help normalize existential anxiety around feeling unsure if a particular major or career path is suitable for the student by relating this experience to their developmental stage (Hartung, 2013). Moreover, Super's theory may be helpful in understanding international career transitions as entering a new cycle of career development (e.g., leaving the disengagement stage in the country of origin and entering the growth stage anew in the destination country). Career counseling using SCCT could offer insight into the types of activities students are good at and find rewarding (Thompson & Dahling, 2012). Constructivist and social constructionist realms have offered broader perspectives in conceptualizing career development (Patton & McMahon, 2014; Savickas, 2013a), which is particularly useful with diverse populations (Leung & Yuen, 2012) to narrate new possibilities.

Perhaps, as no one theory can appropriately capture the career development experiences of all international students, one suggestion would be to follow the idea of Patton and McMahon (2014) to use STF as a meta-theory in conjunction with a more specified theory, such as Holland's vocational types. In this way, practitioners can include the broad, contextual elements, while also targeting relevant tasks to enhance career development. For example, exploring the interactions between a client's occupational interests (e.g., engineering), and the contextual influences (e.g., her preferences and her parents' preferences) and environmental restrictions (e.g., societal views of women in engineering) on her interests. In this way, practitioners can create nuanced and meaningful career development tasks.

### **Future Research Directions**

In advancing the career development field to appropriately reflect the needs of international students, there are a few key areas for continued investigation. One area is the applicability and utility of constructivist and social constructionist theories, and how practitioners can use these broad perspectives in a concentrated and concrete way (McMahon & Patton, 2016; Reid, 2006). This is an important consideration for many international students, who have a wide range of English-language abilities and who may find working in abstract terms frustrating or unhelpful, particularly if they are working under deadlines to secure employment for work permit requirements (Nunes & Arthur, 2014). For example, McMahon et al. (2015) have created and evaluated the utility of an STF-based career assessment. Future research could explore how such emerging tools might be helpful in bringing more structure into the career planning and decision-making process.

Another potential area of future research is to investigate how STF and another career theory could work together, in a hybrid, to capture career development (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Specifically, exploring limitations and benefits of using STF as a meta-theory to guide and a more traditional career development theory to focus the content. Researchers could examine how this hybrid works at representing and being applicable to international students. If this hybrid approach is helpful, practitioners then may be able to offer a greater range of appropriate tools in career counselling with international students. Finally, researchers might consider further examination of updates to traditional theories to account for the experiences of diverse individuals (e.g., Arthur & McMahon, 2019), such as international students. This examination would require an evaluation of whether or not these adaptations simply mask inherent cultural value biases, or if they have applicability and appropriateness in use with diverse populations (Flores, 2014; Watson, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

This current article outlined prominent career development theories and evaluated their applicability with international students. Although each of the selected theories had benefits, there were also critical drawbacks in capturing international students' career development. Moving forward, researchers could explore the utility of combining theories to meet international students' needs. As governments and post-secondary institutions in many countries of the world will continue to recruit international students in increased numbers, career development practitioners and researchers need nuanced approaches to provide appropriate, relevant, and helpful services to this population (Scott et al., 2015). Through these innovations, the career development field can continue to evolve in step with the increasing mobility of populations who seek to improve their career options through international education.

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## **Current Study**

The two manuscripts in this chapter highlighted the influence of internationalization policy on international student recruitment and the resulting gaps in student service provision, as well as the need for continued exploration of international students' career development process to support appropriate theoretical conceptualizations. As part of this exploration, researchers also need to understand international students' experiences in undergoing a university-to-work transition and how they make sense of this experience, not only their initial adjustment to and experience in-study (Woodend & Arthur, 2018). This exploration could help to address some of the deficiencies and biases in career development theories, further highlight barriers that international students face in this transition, and, importantly, may provide ideas for appropriate conceptualizations of this experience, along with best practices to support international graduates (Arthur & McMahon, 2019).

These advances in knowledge and practice will be critical as post-secondary institutions continue to recruit more international students (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018). As such, I developed the following overarching research question for my doctoral thesis research: How do former international students make sense of their university-to-work transition? In Chapter 3, I expand upon this overarching research question, as well as described the philosophical paradigm and research approach used to address this research question.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method and Design**

In this chapter, I begin with an outline of my ontological and epistemological conceptualization of this research and how this conceptualization resulted in choosing a qualitative research paradigm. I then present a manuscript that provides an overview of my chosen research method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and a justification for its use in exploring international students' career transitions. After the manuscript, I explain the procedure that I used when deciding participant eligibility, recruiting participants, and setting up and conducting interviews, as well as ethical considerations that went into planning the study. Finally, I overview the procedure that I followed when I analyzed the data and how I evaluated the rigour of my analysis and the findings.

#### **Ontological and Epistemological Conceptualization, and Research Paradigm**

In terms of ontology, I approached this study from a subjectivist philosophy, which posits that there are multiple, subjective interpretations of reality (Lichtman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). That is, people have their own interpretations of themselves and their world, which are different yet not less valid than others' interpretations of their own situation. This position is in contrast to realism, which posits one, objective reality that exists apart from human cognition, or meaning-making in understanding the world (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Putnam, 2016). I am drawn to a subjectivist philosophy because it shifts away from this idea that research can be understood from a fundamental "truth" and instead embraces the contextual influences that shape understanding (Patton & McMahon, 2017).

Aligned with this ontological stance, I brought a constructivist epistemology to this study. According to Cobern (1993), constructivism is the philosophical thought that human beings create meaning of their reality through the iterative interactions between their experiences in the

world and their cognitions. This meaning-making process is an active one, with people as an open system that is continuously shifting in understanding the world. The emphasis in constructivism is on individuals and the meaning they derive from their experiences in the world. There is no final outcome (i.e., an objective truth) but instead it is a process of making meaning (Patton & McMahon, 2017). This is in contrast with social constructionism, which similarly posits that people create meaning. In social constructionism, however, meaning-making is a collaborative process amongst people, with an emphasis on the use of language to co-construct their understanding of the world (Gergen, 1985). Although both emphasize that there is no one true reality, they diverge in where they believe meaning exists. For social constructionism, it is in the dynamic of the relationships between people (i.e., outward focus). For constructivism, it is rooted in each individual, in an ongoing development based on their contextual influences (i.e., inward focus; Patton & McMahon, 2017).

This ontological and epistemological perspective aligns with my understanding of the world. That is, it represents my reflections of growing up the child of immigrant parents in Canada and witnessing the sometimes small but important differences in ways of living. I further developed these reflections while working in Japan, where I experienced divergent ideas and practices that constituted equally valid approaches to a successful society. For example, I had assumed that medication comes in tablet form but then in Japan received it in powder form, importantly noticing the same effect. Through these experiences, I came to appreciate the multitude of ways of living; moreover, the limitless individual perspectives relating to these ways of living. Not only does a constructivist perspective align with these experiences, but it also embraces diversity by supporting individually held ideas of culture, rather than enforcing universalism or stereotypes (Arthur, 2017). Another key aspect of constructivism that fit with my

understanding is that people are actively engaged in the meaning-making process, rather than existing within a pre-existing reality (Patton & McMahon, 2017).

In following with my alignment with a subjectivist and constructivist lens, I selected Systems Theory Framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014) as the framework through which to conceptualize the findings from this research. As described more fully in Chapter 2, Patton and McMahon (2014) described STF as being rooted in constructivist underpinnings and emphasized the contextual influences that help to shape individuals' unique and ever shifting career journeys. From this constructivist background, Patton and McMahon asserted that there is no one career trajectory, or static decision in STF; instead, it is an ongoing process with influences that shift in and out of salience for individuals. In planning for this research, I felt that the focus on the iterative process of shifting influences in STF would be helpful for understanding the long-term university-to-work transition of the participants that would take part. That is, getting a sense of the influences that participants identified as important to their experiences, and how those influences shifted across their transitions. Given my choice of STF, as well as subjectivist and constructivist perspective, I felt that that a qualitative approach was the most aligned approach for this research. Specifically, qualitative research offers researchers an openness in engaging with participants where participants can express their understanding of unique experiences as well as the contextual influences that shaped these experiences (Patton & McMahon, 2017; Westerman, 2006). In the case of this research, a qualitative research approach allowed for an understanding of how international graduates make meaning of their post-study experience.



**Manuscript #4**

To provide an overview of my chosen research method, IPA, and its theoretical underpinnings, I wrote the following manuscript. Moreover, in the manuscript, I critically explore the advantages and disadvantages of this method when investigating the university-to-work transition experiences of international students. My goal for the manuscript was to detail the background information relevant to IPA while also justifying my choice to use IPA with this population and for this exploration.

**Statement of contribution.** I independently wrote the original work in this manuscript with the support of my supervisory committee member, Dr. Nancy Moules, and my primary supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur.

## Utility of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to Explore International Career Transitions

Jon Woodend

### Abstract

In this critical review article, I evaluated the utility of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in exploring the career development of individuals who have undergone an international career transition. Specifically, I first provided a rationale for conducting an evaluation of IPA and its utility in career development research. I then briefly described the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of IPA before highlighting some of its critical methodological strengths and limitations. Following this general overview, I evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of using IPA to explore international career transitions. Overall, IPA seems to have strong applicability for research in the career development field, particularly because of its a) origins in psychology, b) emphasis on individuals and their unique contexts, and c) potential use by researchers to evaluate the parameters of existing career theories for relevance in the current world of work. However, I also noted some hesitation in being able to distinguish whose interpretation the findings represent when using IPA with participants from non-dominant groups. Finally, I considered ethical considerations when presenting in-depth information.

### Introduction

Decreases in domestic birthrates of developed countries and greater global connectivity have opened the job market beyond local geographical confines to include transnational opportunities (Arthur, 2014). Rates of elective, career-motivated migration, immigration, international sojourning, and foreign education-seeking have continued to increase (Guo, 2014). These trends compound the challenges career practitioners face in working with such clients, whose career development not only spans new fields of work and multiple career changes throughout life, but also across borders and the multicultural complexities that accompany those transitions (Arthur & McMahon, 2019; McMahon & Watson, 2012). Given these complexities, many career development researchers have noted concern that theory and research within the career development field has not adequately addressed the experiences of individuals from diverse cultural contexts (Arthur & McMahon, 2019; Flores, 2014). Researchers have advocated for a re-examination of assumptions and theories within the field in order to update findings to incorporate these changes (Kennedy & Chen, 2012; Savickas, 2012; Watson, 2019).

For example, career practitioners have acknowledged the need to expand career development from models and theories that assume a static career choice to ones that incorporate a process of career choices across time, socio-political influencing, and other contextual factors (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Specifically, recent career theories have followed the parallel trend found in counselling psychology of adapting constructivist or social constructionist epistemological perspectives. One of the appealing features of these perspectives is that they assume that individuals create their own understanding of the world, and how they make sense of their role in it (Savickas, 2012). This is critical for conceptualizing best practices or engaging in appropriate research with diverse populations, for whom understandings based on a generalized or universal experience may not be applicable.

In furthering this re-examination, it is important to consider the approaches that researchers will use to inform these necessary updates. Qualitative approaches offer researchers an openness in engaging with participants that allow for the salience of participants' unique and

multiple experiences to surface (Lichtman, 2012). Given the shifts in the career development field and society more generally, there is a need for novel research eschewing established knowledge in order to better understanding international career transitions. As such, the qualitative paradigm is most in line with this goal. Within qualitative approaches, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a method that originated within psychology and seeks to provide rich descriptions and interpretations of lived experiences, with an explicit focus on, and respect for, the fecundity of the individual experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA seems to be one approach that may be useful in helping with this re-examination of career development to understand the experiences of an international career transition as it does not seek to create generalized understandings and is designed to address complexities related to individual diversity.

In order to discern the fit of IPA as a method of choice for this re-examination, in this article, I review the utility of IPA in exploring international career transitions. Specifically, I first provide an overview of IPA in order to direct the reader to this method. Second, I outline the advantages and contraindications of IPA in investigating the experiences of international career transitions, in order to evaluate its applicability with this topic and field. Finally, I offer suggestions for future considerations moving forward with IPA as a method within the career development field along with a summary evaluation of IPA.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012), IPA is a relatively recent qualitative method that originated within health psychology. IPA involves the experimental and experiential essences of psychology as the purpose of using IPA is to examine the meaning people make of major life experiences. In IPA, experience means a specific moment that was impactful or of significance to the individual. This could be an everyday experience that has, for whatever reason, become significant for the individual at this particular time and is a source of reflection (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Theoretical Foundation**

While Smith (1996) provided the first comprehensive postulation of IPA as a discrete qualitative method, IPA incorporates a rich history of philosophical work, which forms its theoretical foundation (Shinebourne, 2011b). Specifically, IPA has three theoretical axes including phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). To appreciate the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, I will briefly outline the critical concepts from each theoretical axis as they pertain to IPA.

**Phenomenology.** In general, phenomenology is the philosophical study of experience with an emphasis on the examination of experiences as they occur and on their own terms (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). As such, phenomenology offers psychology researchers a bevy of ideas for understanding the lived experience. One of the most influential phenomenologists was Husserl (1982), whose approach to phenomenology emphasized that individuals could accurately reflect upon their experiences to identify the essence of this experience. Husserl believed that these essences would transcend the individual and illuminate features of the collective experience of this particular phenomenon. For Husserl (1971), intentionality of focus onto these experiences was important as this allows for individuals to step outside their everyday experiences and instead turn their focus toward their perceptions of objects in their world. It is this intentional focus on the perceptions of objects in our world that is critical to IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Specifically, Husserl influenced IPA researchers to give credence to the process of

reflection and the attentive, systematic investigation of our lived experiences.

Heidegger (1927/1962), a former student of Husserl, further influenced the philosophical thought of phenomenology, building upon while also deviating from Husserl's ideas. Specifically, Heidegger moved away from the transcendence of essences of experiences and instead questioned whether any knowledge could exist outside of an interpretive perspective. That is, there is a focus on inter-subjectivity, or the understanding of the world as it appears to us and how we make meaning from it, given the relationships and activities in which we each engage. For IPA, it is this perspective of being in relation to something that is critical (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In particular, Heidegger influenced researchers to consider the notion that individuals exist within a pre-established world in which they create their own meanings about experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Beyond Husserl and Heidegger, two other phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1956), are important in understanding the phenomenological perspective in IPA. Merleau-Ponty shared Heidegger's ideas around individual in relation to the world; however, Merleau-Ponty went further and argued that individuals' bodies are the tools for communicating within the world, creating a primacy of our own situated perspective. For IPA, this means that researchers can never share entirely in someone else's experience as it is dependent on their unique situation, but we can observe it through our own perspective (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Sartre also expanded upon Heidegger's idea of understanding as an individual in the world to include the absence of objects. In IPA, this manifests as an understanding that the meaning we make of our experiences is in relation to the presence and absence of relationships in our lives (Smith et al., 2009).

**Hermeneutics.** The second theoretical axis in IPA is hermeneutics which, simply put, is the theory of interpretation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Traditionally, scholars used hermeneutics to interpret the Bible, however, this evolved into interpretations of other texts, such as literary and historical works, eventually leading to transcripts of interviews in research studies (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015). There were three key philosophers that influenced the hermeneutic tradition in IPA: Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009). Schleiermacher (1998) was one of the first philosophers to articulate a more systematic approach to hermeneutics. Specifically, Schleiermacher noted that there is a grammatical and psychological approach to interpretation. That is, interpretation can be in one way exact and objective in meaning, as well as in another way subjective to the particular person. For IPA, this means that researchers can offer insights into the explicit, face value information shared by participants regarding a particular experience, while also shunning claims of one analysis or interpretation being truer than another (Shinebourne, 2011b).

Heidegger (1927/1962) advocated for phenomenology as hermeneutic; that is, IPA researchers do not simply report participants' descriptions of how experiences appeared to them, but they also provide an interpretation of these descriptions, with synthesis across descriptions (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, Heidegger claimed that researchers move back and forth between their own preconceptions regarding the phenomenon under exploration and the participants' descriptions of their experience with it. Specifically, preconceptions influence researchers' interpretations, and the descriptions in return influence the researchers' preconceptions moving forward (Shinebourne, 2011b). Gadamer (1960/2004) echoed Heidegger's thoughts around this dynamic and cyclical process of influence, going a step further to suggest that researchers cannot know their preconceptions until the analysis and interpretation process (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The importance of Gadamer's work for IPA researchers is that our preconceptions are inevitable, yet we can bring into focus novel stimuli in order to give voice to alternative perspectives (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This creates a hermeneutic circle, which involves the iterative exploration of the whole and its parts, in relation to each other (Smith et al., 2009).

**Idiography.** The final theoretical axis in IPA is idiography, which is the study of the particular (Shinebourne, 2011b). Specifically, idiography focuses on specific detail and depth of understanding regarding a particular behaviour for a particular person, rather than nomothetics, which emphasizes general claims regarding common behaviours (Eatough & Smith, 2017). For IPA, idiography offers another way of creating transferable ideas. That is, by understanding the particular cases for many people, eventually researchers can build toward more nuanced and intricately informed understandings regarding behaviour (Bromley, 1986; Smith, 2017).

### **Practical Application**

As well as understanding the theoretical foundation of IPA, it is also important to be familiar with the practical application of IPA in a study in order to appreciate its utility in addressing the current changes in the world of work and the experience of making an international career transition. As such, in this section I briefly outline the study design and data analysis process typically found in an IPA study.

**Study design.** Smith et al. (2009) noted that in choosing IPA as the method for a study, researchers should consider whether their intended outcome is epistemologically congruent with IPA. Specifically, IPA is appropriate if we are investigating the meaning-making process of individuals regarding a particular experience, based upon their position in the world. Studies in IPA tend to be more exploratory in nature and have a guiding research question that asks, "how does this group of people make sense of/perceive/think/understand this experience?" The goal implicit within IPA research questions is comprehending a process-oriented phenomenon (Shinebourne, 2011a). Given this open and exploratory nature of IPA, studies using this method do not need a theory to guide it; however, Smith et al. explained that second-tier research questions may be included when using a guiding theory as well to help evaluate the theory.

In terms of size and demographic make-up of the study sample, researchers should reflect the theoretical axes of IPA. The sample should be purposive, explicitly seeking those individuals with relevant experiences, as well as small and homogenous, recruiting for depth rather than breadth of information (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). Generally, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommended between six and 15 participants, depending on depth of information retrieved. Of note, participants in IPA studies may be involved in the study design process more than typical qualitative studies (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Particularly, the researchers may ask participants to help form interview questions, provide participant validation of data analysis, or even offer suggestions for data analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

In terms of data collection, in-person, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, or personal diaries may be the best source of rich, detailed information from participants, which is in keeping with the IPA tradition (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Other sources, such as focus groups, can also illicit quality data so long as there is an emphasis on delving deeply into the individual experience, rather than skimming across experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA researchers typically construct an interview schedule for the interviews with around 10 questions the researcher would like to ask, but with generous flexibility to deviate to more salient questions, particularly to concerns of the participants, as they arise during the interview (Smith et al., 2009). Beyond the interview schedule, it is important to ask participants to elaborate on what they have

shared to gain a deeper understanding of their worldview.

**Data analysis.** For data analysis in IPA, there are a few main processes or principles that help guide interpretation. Specifically, researchers can move iteratively from particular to shared experiences and from understanding a particular point of view to a psychological perspective of personal meaning-making (Shinebourne, 2011a). Researchers engage reflectively with the verbatim interview transcriptions through line-by-line analysis, and by flexibly following the six steps as outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

Smith et al. (2009) noted that, firstly, IPA researchers read and re-read; the researcher reads while listening to focus in on the participant, then re-reading to focus in further, all while recording personal reflections and preconceptions that become apparent. Secondly, they create initial coding; the researcher takes the time to explore the semantic and language content of the transcript to produce detailed descriptions of the data using the key words expressed by the participant. Thirdly, IPA researchers develop emergent themes; the researchers shift from working with the original transcript to their detailed descriptions, maintaining complexity but finding core ideas. Fourthly, they search for connections across emergent themes; researchers start to organize, combine and reform themes in relation to each other. Fifthly, they move to the next case; researchers look at another transcript and attempt to treat it independently of the previous ones, moving through the same steps. Lastly, IPA researchers look for patterns across cases; the researcher makes comparisons and contrasts to the themes in each case to each other, creating higher level interpretations. When writing about the findings from an IPA study, Smith (2017) stressed the importance of providing quotations from participants with each theme and interpretation to keep the findings grounded in the data.

### **Utility of IPA**

Having presented IPA and its practical application to research studies, in this section I review its key methodological strengths and limitations, along with how these concepts translate into IPA's utility in career development research. Specifically, I highlight relative advantages and contraindications of using IPA to explore the experiences of making an international career transition.

### **Advantages of IPA**

There are seven key advantages of using IPA to conduct research investigating international career transitions. First, IPA has a theoretical foundation that is based upon long-standing philosophical traditions, which are blended together to form a coherent approach (Shinebourne, 2011b). This coherency then allows researchers to claim that IPA has theoretical transferability (Smith et al., 2009). That is, by building an understanding from the very detailed accounts of individual cases, IPA researchers can start to form theories or models that guide practice around particular experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). For example, Smith et al. (2009) noted that the body of literature around experiences of pain using IPA is substantial enough to start creating a theory around the experience of pain; researchers can compile samples across studies to construct meta-interpretations.

Second, researchers within psychology developed IPA for conducting psychological studies (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009). That is, one of the purposes of IPA is to explore the behaviours of individuals, as well as their thoughts and beliefs, which is congruent with the main aims of psychological research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2011). The bulk of seminal work using IPA was in health psychology (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), which was responding to demands within the field to heed the subjective experiences of participants and

patients, rather than strict adherence to impersonal rating scales (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Currently, the use of IPA has spread into other related psychology fields, such as cognition (e.g., Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011), sexuality (e.g., Farmer & Byrd, 2015), counselling psychology (e.g., Pugh & Vetere, 2009), and occupational and industrial organisation (e.g., Clarke, 2009). There is a precedence then for the use of IPA in diverse psychological fields. Moreover, the guiding principles of IPA are consistent with those in counselling for career development concerns, specifically, emphasizing individuals' agency, respecting their voice, and considering the influences of context (Savickas, 2012; Patton & McMahon, 2014).

Third, researchers can use IPA to help evaluate the utility and boundaries of existing theories (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Specifically, the case-by-case approach to IPA can provide exemplars of theories, outliers of experiences not conceptualized by theories, and insight into how theories might be further developed to reflect these unexpected experiences. Researchers and practitioners are then able to use their professional experience and knowledge to make theoretical or practice-based decisions regarding the particular experience (e.g., experiences of acute pain) and also around its transferability with other, similar experiences or groups (e.g., experiences of chronic pain; Smith et al., 2009).

Fourth, Smith et al. (2009) explicitly suggested using IPA for conducting studies looking at transition experiences. In particular, the reflective and iterative process inherent within IPA can be helpful for participants to gain potentially previously unconsidered insight into important transition experiences in their life. Through this process, researchers can also see how identity shifted through the transition and the contextual elements that facilitated or hindered the transition (Smith & Osborn, 2007), potentially providing insight into best practices in assisting with a career transition. Furthermore, researchers have used IPA to look at career issues (e.g., Bricker-Katz, Lincoln, & Cumming, 2013; Cope, 2011; Sallis & Birkin, 2014) as well as migration (e.g., O'Brien & Tribe, 2014), with one study looking at temporary international career transitions (Fitzgerald & Howe-Walsh, 2009). Taken together, there is evidence that using IPA to explore international career transitions is not only in line with the purpose of IPA, but can provide useful insights for practice based on relevant experience in the current world of work (Arthur, 2014; McMahon & Patton, 2012).

Fifth, unlike quantitative methods or methods such as grounded theory where the aggregate or summative experience is the focus (Lichtman, 2012), the individual voice of the participant is the main focus (Larkin et al., 2006). This is particularly important and useful when working with participants from non-dominant groups (e.g., LGBT community) whose voices society has often subsumed within the dominant discourse or marginalized altogether (Thurston, 2014; Todorova, 2011). While researchers can use IPA to eventually guide theoretical thought regarding particular experiences (Smith et al., 2009), theory creation is only a secondary, long-term goal, with the primary purpose of IPA always being to honour and elevate the individual voice (Smith, 2017). This honouring of individual voices produces findings that embody and are relevant to actual people, rather than statistical approximations and averages that may not represent real participants. Larkin and Thompson (2012) argued that experience is complex and that reduction of complexity for theory's sake is dehumanizing and removes critical elements for ethical and competent practice, such as the history and context of these experiences. By honouring the voices of people who have been marginalized and advocating for the portrayal of a comprehensive picture of experience (Arthur, 2014; Pope, 2015), IPA takes a social justice

stance against the status quo (Smith et al., 2009).

A sixth and related advantage of using IPA is, given that people from non-dominant ethnic groups currently account for a large proportion of individuals undergoing an international career transition to developed countries (Kennedy & Chen, 2012), IPA seems to have some support in respecting ethnic diversity (Todorova, 2011). As IPA focuses on individuals (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014), researchers can focus on particular experiences without compiling experiences. Specifically, Arthur and Pedersen (2008) noted that methods with case study-like approaches are well suited to exploring differences in cultural identities, privilege, and power as they provide rich detail about the contextual and situational circumstances in which participants had these experiences and made meaning from them. In this way, researchers have successfully used IPA in a number of studies with individuals with different ethnicities and diverse linguistic backgrounds, as well as other non-dominant group identities (e.g., O'Brien & Tribe, 2014; Tan, Ward, & Ziaian, 2010; van Rooij, van Balen, & Hermanns, 2009; Vincent, Jenkins, Larkin, & Clohessy, 2013).

A final key advantage of IPA is that it is relatively accessible in comparison to some other forms of qualitative methods (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). This is particularly the case for researchers who have largely conducted studies from the quantitative paradigm, or students for whom qualitative research is a novel endeavor (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). One reason for this accessibility is that Smith et al. (2009) presented complex, deeply philosophical traditions, such as phenomenology and hermeneutics, in a manner that immediately highlighted the applicability of these theoretical underpinnings to the practical use of IPA (Shinebourne, 2011b). While the descriptions of these theoretical foundations are somewhat simplified, and possibly counterintuitive to the IPA purpose of respecting complexity (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Willig, 2001), these descriptions offer entry points into qualitative research, with opportunities for further, deeper consideration as researchers become more experienced (Clarke, 2009; Eatough & Smith, 2017). These ease of access to using IPA may be critical for a field needing to shift its focus from universal to nuanced and complex understandings of the experiences of diverse populations.

### **Contraindications of IPA**

In comparison to its advantages, there are six key contraindications that researchers should consider before choosing this method. First, if the researcher is working with individuals with specific ethnicities, it is important to keep in mind ethical considerations regarding privacy of participants (Clark & Sharf, 2007; Pope, 2015). Specifically, some non-dominant groups have a very small number of individuals within the local community, making it possible to identify participants and potentially cause interpersonal conflict (Todorova, 2011). For example, exploring the career transitions of Iraqi refugee women to Canada might reveal negative experiences that reflect poorly upon certain people in the participant's community, of the same ethnicity, or otherwise. In such cases, the researcher cannot guarantee anonymity of the participant (Moules et al., 2015). Presenting the unique case of particular individuals regarding a specific experience is useful in gaining rich detail; however, that rich detail can also give enough information for participants' identities to be puzzled together from the findings (Pope, 2015).

Second, while IPA is supposed to be an iterative process, moving from face-value descriptions and themes to higher level interpretations, this is a difficult process to guide researchers through (Rodham, Fox, & Doran, 2015). This is particularly true for novice researchers, or researchers that have not had experience or training in offering research



interpretations. As such, the findings for IPA studies can often resemble, or be indistinguishable from, general thematic analysis (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2011). Simply providing descriptions of face-value themes can be valuable; however, it does not incorporate the theoretical influence of hermeneutics (Shinbourne 2011b), misrepresenting or mislabeling the study findings as something that they are not. Furthermore, Smith (2011) noted that when he reviewed the quality of various IPA studies, particularly for interpretation of analyses, he rated only 27% as good studies with 55% being acceptable and 18% being unacceptable. These low rates of good IPA studies showcase the difficulty in teaching and supervising IPA studies to reach higher-level interpretations that appropriately reflect the hermeneutic tradition in IPA (Rodham et al., 2015).

A third contraindication of IPA is that its double hermeneutic process, which is the researcher's understanding of the meaning made by participants regarding a particular experience, muddies whose voice the findings represent (Smith, 2011). Although the purpose of IPA research is to emphasize individuals' experience, with a focus on their respective context (Thurston, 2014), Todorova (2011) contended that when researchers take these accounts and move toward higher level interpretations, the original voice can be lost. Compounding this, while academia has become more diverse, most researchers are White men with high socio-economic backgrounds (Rodriguez, 2015), potentially resulting in a whitewashing of the findings. Specifically, Todorova noted that when findings are interpreted from this dominant group's perspective, non-dominant voices can be further marginalized, perpetuating social inequalities and injustices. Regarding this re-authorship of experiences, IPA does not offer explicit steps to avoid continued oppression, instead relying upon the inherent iterative reflection process of the researcher to reveal these preconceptions throughout the research process (Smith et al., 2009).

A fourth and related contraindication to using IPA for exploring international career transitions is that it requires participants to have fluency in the English language (Todorova, 2011). That is, researchers typically use semi-structured interviews with IPA to collect data, with the intent of collecting deep, reflective information (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). As many individuals who complete an international transition are from non-English speaking countries, English fluency may be an important consideration in planning research (Kennedy & Chen, 2012; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). When participants respond in English, it may be with some difficulty; for example, choosing words they know in English versus words that more appropriately describe their experience (Smith, 2011; Todorova, 2011). For researchers, when participants have difficulty communicating, this can create thinner descriptions and reflections regarding their experience, resulting in superficial data rather than rich in detail (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Pope, 2015). Although researchers can use language interpreters to help with communication, this creates additional ethical considerations (e.g., participants share their potentially traumatic experience with more than the researcher; Pugh & Vetere, 2009) as well as questions about the analysis interpretations (i.e., there are three levels of interpretation; the participant's, the interpreter's, and the researcher's; Pope, 2015; Todorova, 2011).

A fifth contraindication is that IPA does not directly produce a theory or model (Pringle et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Although theory generation is not the principle goal of an IPA study, it is a more long-term objective once researchers have completed multiple studies with various populations regarding this experience (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Given that existing career theories are struggling to reflect the career transition experiences of individuals in the current world of work (Gallie, 2017), with people from non-dominant groups particularly

unrepresented (Flores, 2014), there is a need for theories that help guide effective and relevant client work. As such, if the researcher's purpose for exploring international career transitions is to address this need, using IPA will not be immediately helpful. Instead, using IPA would require substantial resources to conduct multiple studies, as well as time to then create a meta-analysis or meta-synthesis of interpretations across studies to form a comprehensive theory (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). While the unique individual experience is useful in appreciating the context in which the experience arose for that person, it is not intended to be generalizable (Pringle et al., 2011; Roberts, 2013).

A final contraindication of IPA is that Smith et al. (2009) have set up IPA to strive to meet standards and validation that echo those within the quantitative paradigm (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). That is, while Smith et al. advocated for flexibility in the analysis process, particularly when making higher level interpretations, the authors seemed to be trying to balance criticisms from quantitative researchers regarding qualitative studies when discussing the rigour and validity of IPA studies (Grypdonck, 2006). Specifically, Smith et al. sought to describe a systematic, step-by-step approach to IPA, particularly for guiding analysis, which may be counterintuitive to phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions (Moules et al., 2015; Shinebourne, 2011b). At the same time, Smith et al. acknowledged that if researchers use quantitative standards to evaluate IPA research then researchers will not find IPA to be as rigorous as quantitative methods. As such, Smith et al. called for more qualitative standards, such as transparency through audit trails instead of study replication. Smith et al. admitted to trying to strike a balance between these tensions, seeing IPA as a bridge between quantitative and qualitative paradigms, and yet in the process, potentially missed an opportunity to situate IPA within its phenomenological and hermeneutic foundations (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Willig, 2001).

### **Future Considerations**

Moving forward with research in the career development field and with international career transitions in particular, there are a few areas needing further development. Specifically, there are relatively few studies evaluating the utility or quality of IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Todorova, 2011), with some of those that do exist coming from one of its creators (e.g., Smith, 2011), and whose seminal textbook is now almost 10 years old (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers could look into updating these resources to further establish the parameters of IPA's utility in exploring various experiences. As well, most of the current IPA studies are from researchers in the UK context (Smith, 2011; Todorova, 2011), necessitating work in other areas of the world, particularly outside the Western, English-speaking context to evaluate IPA's utility in more diverse contexts. Finally, researchers could also investigate the cross-cultural appropriateness of IPA with emphasis on navigating potential ethical and practical roadblocks to eliciting rich data in situations where there may be language barriers (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Todorova, 2011).

### **Summary Evaluation and Conclusion**

Overall, IPA appears to be a method that has promise in providing innovative perspectives to the current changes in the world of work. This is particularly the case when considering international career transitions. Researchers can use IPA to delve deeply into the unique experiences of diverse individuals in order to understand how they made meaning of their career transition (Fitzgerald & Howe-Walsh, 2009). As well, researchers can gain insight into the impactful contextual factors that facilitated or hindered these transition experiences. Eventually, researchers can conduct a meta-synthesis of IPA studies looking at international career

transitions to create a theory that may help career practitioners guide their work with clients in the current world of work (Gallie, 2017; McMahon & Patton, 2012).

At the same time, it is important that researchers keep in mind that IPA is a relatively new method and there are some theoretical considerations that need further elaboration to appropriately conduct quality studies with higher-level interpretations (Smith, 1996; Pringle et al., 2011). Moreover, researchers will need to keep in mind practical considerations when using IPA, such as participants' abilities to share deeply about their experience due to constraints related to language fluency (Todorova, 2011). As the current world of work will continue to shift with increased global economic cooperation, technological advances, and migration (Arthur, 2014), IPA may offer researchers and career practitioners alike the opportunity to understand international career transitions in a meaningful and contextually relevant way.

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## Research Design

In this section I outline the research design used to investigate this study. Specifically, I detail the research questions used to frame the study, the participant eligibility and recruitment procedures, data collection procedures, important ethical considerations, and the data analysis process. To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to learn more about international graduates' experiences post-study, particularly relating to their university-to-work transition. As such, the overarching research question of this study is: "How do former international students make sense of their university-to-work transition?" A sub-question is: "How has this transition influenced their intentions to stay and work in Canada?"

**Participant eligibility and recruitment.** Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) noted that IPA studies could have as few as one participant thanks to its idiographic philosophical underpinning; however, they recommended between six and 15 participants as this range is typically where researchers gain sufficient insights to move beyond surface level themes and create the higher level interpretations. As such, I aimed for at least 10 participants; specifically, the eligibility criteria I used consisted of people who identified as studying in Canada as international students and who were living and working within Canada at the time of the study. Moreover, the study was limited to participants who had graduated from university more than two but less than five years ago. This time encompasses the period at which international graduates are transitioning from the post-graduation student work permit, which allows students to work in Canada up to three years post-graduation. In this way, the sample reflects the experiences past the initial adjustment to the Canadian workforce and instead represent those individuals considering more permanent relocation to Canada. As the study focus was on the post-study experiences of international graduates, particularly their university-to-work transition and not specific to other

demographic influences, I did not limit the sample based on ethnicity, gender, age, country of origin, education level, or field of study. To recruit former international students, I sent out posters through the University of Calgary Career Services and Centre for International Students and Study Abroad, as well as social media (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn; see Appendix B). I also asked participants if they knew of other international graduates who might be eligible and interested in participating, commonly known as a snowball recruitment process.

**Data collection.** After participants completed informed consent (see Appendix C), as per the IPA tradition (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), I conducted in-person or Skype, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. For the interviews, I constructed an interview schedule (see Appendix D) that included demographic questions as well as nine questions regarding participants' experience post-study. Throughout the interview process, I remained open and flexible with the interview schedule to deviate and include more salient questions as guided by participants' experiences. After completing the questions in the interview schedule, I invited the participants to debrief what it was like to reflect on questions about their post-study experience. Finally, I offered participants a \$25 Amazon.ca gift card as a token of appreciation for their time.

**Ethical considerations.** In moving forward with this study, there were two main ethical considerations. First, reflecting on potentially sensitive topics, such as the transition from university to work, could have brought up uncomfortable or difficult memories that could affect the participants' well-being (Moules et al. 2015). Although moving to and living in a foreign country can be exciting and positive, it can also be difficult, with the possibility of personal adjustment concerns, particularly for non-native English speaking individuals and/or people from non-dominant groups (Flores, 2014; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). The university to work transition can be a challenging time for domestic students, but particularly for international students who



may have fewer resources and less experience with the local job market (Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). Struggling to make a transition to the workforce can have negative effects on individuals' perceptions of their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth. At the same time, sharing these difficult experiences may be cathartic for some participants (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, not asking about these experiences, positive or negative, would leave a gap in understanding international students' university to work transition and potentially help perpetuate unjust systems influencing this population (Dei, 2005; Pope, 2015).

A second ethical consideration is that, although presenting the unique case of particular individuals regarding a specific experience is useful in gaining rich detail, it can also give enough information for participants' identities to be puzzled together from the findings (Moules et al., 2015). Depending on the nature of the experiences shared (e.g., negative interactions with prominent members in the community) and the audience this study reaches, there was the potential that knowledge of participants' identities could influence their well-being (e.g., employment status). In addressing this concern, when completing the data analysis, I attempted to keep participants' experiences confidential and I stressed to participants that, despite my best efforts, I could not guarantee absolute confidentiality so that they could make an informed decision about what they would share.

**Data analysis.** In analysing the data, I followed the six steps as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). First, I read one transcript with a focus on listening to the participant, and then I re-read it to gain a deeper understanding of what the participant said, how the participant said it, and the context in which it existed. As I was engaging in this process, I noted personal reflections and preconceptions of which I became aware. Second, for this same transcript, I created initial coding that included my observations about the semantic and language content from the previous

step, using key words as expressed by the participant. Third, still with the same case, I started to develop emergent themes that expressed the core and complex ideas of the participant by shifting from the original transcript to the detailed initial coding. Fourth, I searched for connections across the emergent themes in order to begin organizing, combining, and reforming themes to understand their relation to each other. Fifth, I then repeated steps one through four as listed above for the next transcript while mentally framing it as independent from the previous transcript in order to help focus on the unique experience of that participant. Once I reviewed all transcripts as independently as possible, I began to look explicitly for patterns across participants' experiences. In particular, I compared and contrasted the emergent themes and worked toward creating higher-level interpretations that bridged across participants' experiences. I revisited these higher-level interpretations several times to further refine their connections and ensure that they made sense within each participant's context.

Table 1

*Example of Data Analysis Steps*

Analysis Step	Analysis Example	Transcript Example
1. Re and Re-read	Blinders on to other potential routes?	<i>Reem:</i> It was never an option, I always thought I would study and go home... where else would I go, its home right. I'd go home in the summers for four months, I would think this is just a thing I have to do in order to go back home. The plan was always to go back home. Particularly because I'm a girl, so if you're a girl you're not going to just settle on your own, you have to be with family, so there was no option of me saying hey, I bought an apartment or something that would be ridiculous.
2. Initial Coding	Parental/societal expectations influencing her expectations of her career/life?	
3. Emerging Themes	Expectation of returning home	
4. Connections Across Themes	Assumption of returning home	
5. Repeat Process with Other Transcripts	Noticing other transcripts have themes of assumptions	
6. Themes Across Transcripts	Superordinate theme: Career Subtheme: Assumptions	

**Assessing validity.** Smith et al. (2009) discussed assessing validity in IPA research through four broad principles, as outlined by Yardley (2000). First, IPA researchers should be sensitive to context. This means that researchers consider contextual factors (e.g., culture, political climate) throughout the entire research process. These considerations can include whom researchers select to participate, how they interpret data, and where they distribute the findings. In my study, I considered both historical and current trends within Canadian immigration and international education policy to be sensitive to the political and societal factors at play. This consideration helped determine whom I selected as participants and the questions I asked in the interviews. Second, IPA researchers need to demonstrate commitment and rigour to their study. Commitment is the dedication that researchers give to conducting meaningful interviews and sensitive interpretations of the data. Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the study (i.e., the appropriateness of researchers' choices in accordance with IPA). In conducting the interviews, I demonstrated my dedication by drawing upon my skills developed as a research assistant as well as a counsellor in training to create a respectful interview environment. As well, I displayed rigour by closely linking themes and interpretations to the data, maintaining participants' voices within the findings.

Third, IPA researchers need to demonstrate transparency and coherence in their research. Transparency refers to clearly outlining the research process through detailed descriptions of the choices made at each stage in the study. Coherence is a line of questioning that IPA researchers must ask themselves regarding whether their findings create a coherent argument and whether their themes hang together logically. For transparency, I created this chapter detailing the decisions I made in regards to my study, including the method. For coherence, as I interpreted the data, I continuously reviewed the literature and my research questions to help keep the

findings in line with my goals for this research. Finally, IPA research must have impact and importance. That is, the findings of IPA research need to have meaning to someone or present an interesting or novel perspective that is useful to others. I developed my study with the goal of giving voice to former international students in Canada and I aimed to create findings that would be helpful not only to international students, but also to policy-makers, career practitioners, and Canadian employers.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the ontological and epistemological perspectives that helped me to frame this study. As well, I included a manuscript that outlined the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of IPA, including an evaluation of its use with investigating international career transitions. Finally, I outlined the participant eligibility, recruitment, and interview procedures that I followed to investigate international graduates' post-study career experiences. In the next chapter, I present the findings of the study.

## **Chapter 4 Research Findings**

In Chapter 2, I grounded my understanding in key literature relevant to international students' career experiences and the theoretical underpinnings. In Chapter 3, I continued developing this understanding into the design and analysis of research with former international students using IPA. After completing these chapters, I was ready to start recruiting and engaging with participants. Eleven former international students responded to my recruitment strategies, representing diverse countries of origin and career journeys. The first participant I spoke with, Iris (pseudonym), responded to a recruitment poster sent over Facebook, moments after I posted it. Prior to us meeting for the interview, Iris shared her enthusiasm for being able to share her experience with me several times, something she indicated she had not been invited or able to do in a formal setting. I soon discovered that Iris was not alone in this desire to tell her story, as all the participants I interviewed would eventually express that they had been waiting or looking for a way to share their experiences.

As a result of participants' enthusiasm to share their experiences we covered a broad range of topics throughout the 11 interviews, and participants were generous with the depth of their reflections into these experiences. As I was analyzing the transcripts, I was struck by the magnitude of data we created. Smith et al. (2009) noted that an IPA study with over six participants is a large study, which requires that the data be looked at more generally than specifically. In completing the data analysis, I wanted to represent the data as comprehensively as possible to honour participants' desire to be heard, while also maintaining a pertinent scope. As such, in Chapter 4, I included two manuscripts to showcase the findings from this study. In each manuscript, along with briefly describing relevant literature and IPA, I described the participant demographics and accompanying details to contextualize the findings. Together,

these two manuscripts represent the main findings from this study.

### **Manuscript 5**

In this manuscript, I focused on the overarching theme of participants' transition experiences both into and out of higher education. Although my original research question was, how do international students make sense of their university-to-work transition, throughout the interviews, participants seemed to conceptualize the transition from university to work in relation to, and linked with, their transition to higher education. In the framing of my original research question, I invited participants to make sense of a discrete event (i.e., university-to-work transition); however, through the course of the interviews, it became clear that they made sense of the transition in a more fluid way that included links to their transition into university. In other words, participants considered aspects of their transition into higher education as a part of their long-term transition into the workforce. This was an unexpected finding and, upon completing the data analysis, I decided that forcing a separation between the two transitions would create an arbitrary distinction that was not reflective of these participants' experiences. Agee (2009) noted that research questions in qualitative approaches are part of a reflective process that occurs throughout the research. Interacting with participants can inform the reflective process, which can further refine the research questions. As such, in this manuscript, I represented both aspects of the transitions into higher education and the workforce. In reflecting on the superordinate themes included in this manuscript, I thought that it served as a follow up to the manuscript in Chapter 2 discussing internationalization policy. The target audience for this manuscript then was higher education institutions, particularly in terms of supporting policy and program creation to support international students.

**Statement of contribution.** I independently wrote the original work in this manuscript with the support of my primary supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur. This manuscript has co-authorship due to the collaborative conceptualization of the ideas between Dr. Arthur and myself.

## Former International Students' Perspectives on Their Transition into and out of Higher Education

Jon Woodend & Nancy Arthur

According to the OECD (2018), the number of international students attending foreign higher educational institutions (HEI) grew by 200% between 1998 and 2018. This unprecedented growth is, in part, due to the recruitment of international students to higher education institutions (HEI), with the aim to enhance their internationalization policies (OECD, 2018). Specifically, international students are a heterogeneous group of highly skilled individuals who contribute to the diversification of campuses and ideas (Knight, 2014). As such, international students play an important role in supporting the aims of internationalization in HEI. Recently, Stein and de Andreotti (2016) questioned the role of international students in HEI, indicating their concern that students are often positioned as resources to support the education of domestic students. Guo and Guo (2017) noted a lack of focus on assuring that international students are receiving a high quality experience that meets their needs. An important area of consideration is how international students are being supported in their transition to university, as well as out of it (Woodend & Arthur, 2018).

Research in this area initially focused on international students' initial transition into university (e.g., Pedersen, 1991), with a more recent and growing body of literature into their post-study transition (e.g., Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). These studies centered the academic and personal experiences of international students who were in study, or shortly post-study, with less focus on their long-term, comprehensive perspectives of transitioning into and out of HEI. These long-term perspectives are needed in order to understand the barriers and supports that affect international students' experiences (Arthur, 2016). As such, the current study focused on gaining further insights into former international students' transitions into and out of HEI in order to inform effective and appropriate policy and program creation.

In this article, we first describe internationalization policy to provide context for the systems influencing international students to seek foreign education. We then describe international students' initial transition into HEI, which has been a predominant focus of researchers, before outlining key findings from the few studies who have looked at international students' transition from HEI. We then outline the current study along with the main findings, and finish with implications for policy and program creation, limitations, and future research directions.

### **Internationalization Policy and the Impetus for International Student Recruitment**

As the world market continues to become interdependent, businesses have had to expand to global consumers in order to maintain a competitive edge (Djelic & Quack, 2018). The same trend is true for HEI, which have adapted internationalization policy (Hawawini, 2016). Internationalization policies typically involve four key components (Knight, 2008): a) collaborations with international partners, b) facilitating mobility across international contexts (i.e., study abroad; international students), c) operating in international settings (i.e., satellite campuses), and d) integrating a global dimension to curriculum. Of these four areas, HEI in countries with highly developed economies have focused on, and largely been successful at, facilitating student mobility (OECD, 2018). Mobility in internationalization policy incorporates both inbound (i.e., students or faculty coming into the HEI) as well as outbound (i.e., students or faculty moving from the HEI to an international context).



Although internationalization policy is supposed to incorporate both inbound and outbound mobility, predominately HEI have focused on inbound student mobility. For HEI, the diverse experiences and perspectives of international students helps to position HEI as educational leaders, capable of competing on the global stage (Trilokekar, 2010). Stein and de Andreotti (2016) noted that an understanding of why this recruitment has been so successful is due to enduring colonial beliefs about the superior value of Western education both locally and internationally, which makes attending a Western HEI attractive. In addition, HEI have seen their domestic revenue decrease as governments limit their contributions to base budgets for education (OECD, 2018). International students pay a higher tuition than domestic students, which helps to address this gap in financial resources and support HEI operations.

The competition to recruit international students has intensified (OECD, 2018), with some HEI marketing higher education as a commodity; that is, selling education to international students as product that they can choose amongst, and offering the best “deal” (Hong, 2018). One problematic aspect of this marketization of education is that universities have been less focused on, and less successful in, fulfilling the other aspects of internationalization policy (Guo & Guo, 2017). In particular, there often does not seem to be a commensurate re-investment of international student tuition into resources that would benefit them. Given that HEI are recruiting international students, it is also their responsibility to ensure that international students are supported into, through, and out of their educational experience (Arthur, 2016). This raises the question of what are international students’ perceptions of the value of the education they are being “sold”?

### **International Students’ Transition into HEI**

To date, one of the most researched areas regarding international students’ experiences is their transition into the local and HEI context (Gopal, 2016). This is a critical period as research has consistently indicated that psychological and socio-cultural adjustment during this transition are predictive of mental health and wellbeing of international students (Brunsting, Zachry, & Takeuchi, 2018). In particular, challenges in adjustment are related to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as dropout from HEI. As such, it is important to have an understanding of the stressors with which international students may struggle. In the transition to the HEI context, international students encounter normative adjustment challenges, typical for domestic and international students alike (Jones, 2017; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). For example, moving to HEI may be the first time that the student is living on their own, which may bring challenges associated with financial concerns (i.e., managing tuition, household bills) and loneliness (i.e., disconnection from social network). As well, the transition from secondary to post-secondary can bring about academic challenges while students are figuring out expectations (Gopal, 2016). Finally, as higher education is often times an opportunity for exploration, students may experience career indecision as they struggle to find paths for their post-study life (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007).

Although these are concerns that both domestic and international students face, the latter may experience additional stress as their international identity intersects with these stressors (Tas, 2013). One example is that international students have higher tuition fees, which may exacerbate their financial concerns. Another example is that international students may struggle with career indecision in two different social, cultural, economic, and geographical contexts (i.e., the destination and origin country).

Beyond these normative stressors, international students may also face concerns that domestic students do not. For many international students, the transition to HEI may be their first interaction with the destination country and living in a different country. Many international students struggle with acculturative stress (i.e., cultural adjustment) and concerns regarding culture shock, homesickness, and role confusion in their new home (Horne, Lin, Anson, & Jacobson, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Another important consideration for international students' transition to university is that they may experience discrimination if they are from a different ethnic group, among other cultural identities, than that of the destination country. Relatedly, international students may experience struggles adjusting to language if they are from a country with a different dominant language (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). These challenges can have implications for international students' ability to create and maintain quality interpersonal connections in the destination country, as well as their self-efficacy to successfully complete their education (Brunsting et al., 2018).

At the same time that international students' transition to HEI can pose struggles to their mental health and wellbeing, research has also documented international students' resilience and propensity for success (Ploner, 2017). As well, given the heterogeneity of the international student population, it is important not to assume that international students will uniformly face acculturative stress in the transition to HEI (Arthur, 2016); they may be experts in the local culture and language, for example, after having attended high school in the destination country. Moreover, Mesidor and Sly (2016) suggested that these initial transition experiences are crucial for learning coping skills for future transitions in life, such as into the workforce. That is, high perceived initial adjustment to the destination country and university seems to be predictive of high self-efficacy to transition successfully into a career (Franco, Hsiao, Gnilka, & Ashby, 2019).

### **International Students Transition out of HEI**

A growing area of research is the investigation of international students' transition out of HEI (Arthur & Nunes, 2014). The research has largely focused on two avenues within this area: the transition back into the country of origin (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), or the transition into the destination country workforce (Woodend & Arthur, 2018). In terms of transition back into the country of origin, Khanal and Gaulee (2019) noted that one of the primary concerns former international students face is reverse culture shock. That is, time spent in the destination country provides different life experience and perspectives than the former international students were exposed to in the country of origin. Through the process of integration into the destination country, former international students typically adapt some of these perspectives. When they return to the country of origin, these shifts in perspective can result in international students feeling shocked or foreign in what was originally their home. Reverse culture shock can be distressing for some former international students, particularly if the societal perspective they are returning to is more restrictive of their personal freedoms compared to what they experienced in the destination country (Arthur, 2016).

For former international students who intend to stay in the destination country, one of the primary struggles is with obtaining and maintaining permission to live and work in the country through the immigration system (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Another challenge is lacking professional connections in the workforce to help secure positions relative to their education and experience (Loo, Luo, & Ye, 2017). Flood (2015) noted that due to this uncertainty from immigration and lack of professional connections, former international students reported that,

instead of being able to plan for long-term integration or career and personal goals, they were living year-to-year. Finally, and importantly, former international students have indicated that many of the struggles (e.g., language barriers) that they faced initially in transitioning to HEI remain into their post-study transition (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Although conceptually the transition into and out of HEI seem like different, discrete experiences, for international students, these experiences may be a continuation of a larger transition.

Although the two phases of transition have predominately been treated as independent experiences, they are part of a continuous process. There is a gap in the literature, then, regarding former international students' comprehensive perspectives of their transition into and out of HEI. Furthermore, there is a lack of long-term reflections on these transition experiences. These post-transition reflections are needed to understand how international students are making sense of this larger experience of navigating their transition experiences.

### **Current Study**

To further the understanding of international students' experiences through long-term reflections, this study was based on the following overarching research question: How do former international students make sense of their transition into and out of university? This section provides an overview of the specific research method used to address this research question, along with the research design and procedure, the participants in the study, and the data analysis process.

### **Research Method**

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, we selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach, as the method (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Specifically, IPA involves in-depth interviews with participants in order to gain rich understanding of their experiences with regard to a particular phenomenon or experience. In this study, the phenomenon in question is the transition from university to the workforce. IPA is based on both the philosophies of phenomenology and hermeneutics (i.e., subjective interpretations of phenomena to make sense of them). Moreover, IPA incorporates an idiographic approach (i.e., uniqueness of the individual perspective). Together, these philosophical traditions mean that IPA analysis reflects how people make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2017).

### **Research Design and Procedure**

After receiving ethics approval from the institution of affiliation, we sent out recruitment emails to academic institutions across Canada via alumni services, international student services, and career services. Academic institutions that were willing to share the recruitment email forwarded it to former international students. As well, we engaged in snowball sampling whereby participants forwarded the recruitment email to their contacts. Eligibility for participating in the study included a) previous experience as an international student at the post-secondary level at a Canadian institution, b) graduation for more than two but less than five years, and c) currently living and working in Canada. We selected these criteria so that participants' experiences reflected the Canadian context and they would have had some time post-study to reflect upon their transition experience, while it would still be easy to recall. After ensuring that participants met the eligibility criteria and completing informed consent, we conducted in-person or telephone/Skype semi-structured interviews that typically lasted about one hour. Along with these interviews, we also asked demographic information (e.g., age, gender, country of origin). Upon completion of the interview, we gave each participant a \$25 gift card as a thank-you for their participation.

## Participants

In total there were 11 participants in this study, all of whom were former international students from Canadian HEI. Eight of the participants identified as female while three identified as male. The average age of participants was 30.70 years old ( $SD = 8.22$ ;  $min = 24$ ,  $max = 52$ ). Two of the participants were from China, two from Japan, and one each from Bahrain, Iran, South Korea, Tanzania, USA, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. For highest level of education, four had a bachelors, and seven had a master's degree. The fields of study included Biology, Business, Engineering, Health Management, International Relations, Neuroscience, Nursing, Psychology, Social Work, and Sociology. The participants had been in Canada for an average of 9.36 years ( $SD = 3.16$ ;  $min = 5$ ,  $max = 15$ ), and they had worked in Canada for an average of 3.25 years ( $SD = 2.06$ ;  $min = 1$ ,  $max = 7$ ). Three of the participants were in their third year post-study, six were in their fourth, and two in their fifth.

## Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, we followed the data analysis steps as outlined in Smith et al. (2009). Specifically, we engaged with one transcript at a time, forming initial codes and then re-analyzing the same transcript for emergent themes. We then repeated this process with each subsequent transcript. Once we completed the initial and emergent themes for each transcript, we compared the initial and emergent themes across transcripts to form superordinate themes. In creating these superordinate themes, we engaged in abstraction (i.e., sorting like ideas), polarization (i.e., divergence of ideas), subsumption (i.e., subsuming ideas), function (i.e., how idea is expressed), contextualization (i.e., cultural or narrative ideas), and numeration (i.e., frequency with which ideas are expressed).

## Results

From the participants' accounts of their experiences, we interpreted four superordinate themes, some of which included subthemes. Table 1 provides an overview of the superordinate themes and their subthemes, along with indicating which participants contributed to the superordinate theme. In this section we describe each of the superordinate themes along with their associated subthemes, and provide examples of quotes to illustrate participants' experiences.

Table 1

*Overview of Themes from Data Analysis*

Superordinate Theme	Contributing Participants										
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Initial Challenges	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Navigating systems											
Personal Circumstances											
Misperceptions	X	X	X		X	X	X				X
Language	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Coping	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Working with Difficulty											
Being Flexible											

## Initial Challenges

When discussing their experiences of transitioning into and out of HEI, all 11 participants indicated that they encountered some initial challenges. These challenges ranged from reoccurring annoyances to more intensive systemic barriers. Across participants, perceived

challenges made their transition into or out of HEI difficult in some way. From their responses, there were two subthemes within these challenges, navigating systems and personal circumstances.

**Navigating systems.** As they transitioned into the HEI context, Cristina, Bobby, Nancy, Reem and Iris all indicated that they struggled to navigate the Canadian education system. For Bobby, the multiple campuses at his university were unexpected and meant that he missed both the international student orientation and some of his first classes as he went to the incorrect campus. Missing these important first steps were noteworthy to Bobby as they seemed to set him back, leaving him feeling behind for his entire degree. Cristina more generally felt it was hard to navigate the openness of Canadian education:

I mean just getting to know like the education system here... Back home they would give you the courses that you have to take first semester, second semester like throughout your entire degree. Here you got to choose them all... So having a list of courses and not knowing what to do and what would be beneficial for me for the future like trying to decide what I actually should be taking was very challenging.

Cristina felt unsure about her decisions in regards to her education, and what these decisions would mean for her more long-term transition out of HEI and into the workforce. For Nancy, Reem and Iris, it was the workload in their programs that was a struggle to adjust to the Canadian education system. Nancy, originally being from the USA, shared that even though English was not an issue for her, she was surprised by the demands of the workload and her continued exhaustion from moving to Canada. Reem explained how workload along with English added an additional challenge in the transition into the Canadian education system:

I clearly remember my first year, telling my friends that “I’m going to drop out after this semester”. I hated it, it was the paper – the amount of papers I had to do was traumatizing. In my undergrad, my husband helped me write all my essays, because I did not know how to write English well. In my masters he was working, so I had to learn myself for the first time how to write my papers on my own. So that was the hardest process. I felt like I just came to Canada all over again and I just felt like I was learning the culture all over again.

It was not just learning to navigate the education system that affected their initial adjustment, but also housing (i.e., rental properties) and healthcare. Iris explained that when she started her master’s degree, her rental home flooded, which left her staying on friends’ couches as she did not know how to secure help in finding emergency alternative housing. Similar to Bobby’s experience, Iris noted that she felt this setback continued to hold her back throughout her degree, relative to her peers who had a better understanding of Canadian support systems. For Nancy, it was the healthcare system that posed the biggest challenge in terms of mind shift:

Well, I guess I had to learn how the healthcare system works in Canada. First of all it’s very different from the US. I didn’t understand how the healthcare system worked at all. I was used to not having health insurance in the US and I never went to a doctor, and just getting used to just going to see a doctor when they wanted to, was all new to me.

Sometimes I felt like I was an anthropologist figuring things out.

The most influential system that all participants indicated struggling to navigate was immigration. This was a challenge that persisted throughout their initial transition into HEI, while they were in HEI, and to the transition to the workforce. Cristina shared that before she

started studying in Canada, there were complications with her study permit that persisted throughout her degree, taking away time to dedicate to integrating into Canada:

There're lots of ups and downs throughout, lots of immigration issues because of my passport that was expiring. I had a passport but they were not renewing passports in Canada, so they only issued stamps and that stamp will say that my passport will be running for another year. So that meant every single year I had to renew my passport and apply for a new study permit. So it was a little bit of a pain.

Iris indicated that she found it hard to strike a course load/life balance during study as she had to maintain a certain level of study for her study permit. Nancy explained that she encountered challenges in navigating the immigration system to have her study permit changed to allow her to work part-time on and off campus so that she could support herself through studies. Reem noted that for her the hardest part of transitioning out of university was ensuring and maintaining the right to work in Canada:

The most difficult aspect of my transition was applying for work permit – oh man, my husband has sponsored me two years ago now -- and I've yet to receive that permanent residency card. On top of all that my [current] work permit sadly enough expires in [a few months]. So I don't know. I'm – next month I have to enquire whether I can extend it otherwise I stop working. Oh my god, I think online it says that I can extend it. So I'm going to enquire as to how I can extend it. So that was the difficult aspect of my application, that process was the most difficult.

Although not explicitly stated by participants, for many, their tone in describing challenges with these different systems suggested that they found them difficult (i.e., exasperating, exhausting) and unexpected (i.e., surprising, more difficult than anticipated).

**Personal circumstances.** When reflecting on their transition into and out of HEI, participants also shared some personal circumstances that presented challenges to them. These were difficulties that were more emotionally and individually felt (i.e., their personal preferences) than barriers that they encountered (e.g., immigration barriers). Reem, Bobby, Nancy, and Jordan noted that they initially felt a lack of personal connection to Canada and the HEI. For Bobby, he felt anonymous at his larger university and disconnected from others. This disconnection made it difficult for Bobby to integrate himself into the campus or broader community. Reem described feeling homesick, which affected her grades as HEI administrators did not acknowledge homesickness as an acceptable reason to be flexible in accommodating her need to return home for a visit mid-semester. For Nancy, the transition into HEI left her feeling lonely. Nancy shared:

Well, I did feel it took me a lot longer to adjust to life here than I thought it would. I mean I thought it would take like a year or two and I'd be totally adjusted but I wasn't. So I did feel kind of lonely in this place for longer than I thought I would. I thought about quitting and leaving in the first year.

Jordan shared the experience of feeling lonely, however, for him it was leaving HEI and entering the workforce. Specifically, he noted that he left the city where he studied for employment and forming connections outside of the HEI context was harder and took longer than when he entered HEI. For Olivia, not knowing what field or type of job she wanted to be in, or would be supported by her work permit and experience made it difficult for her to tailor her job search:

Yeah, so personally for me it was pretty tough because I didn't know what kind of field I wanted to go into... If I had a better idea of what I wanted to do that would have been

easier. Not knowing what I wanted to go into was a bit of a struggle just because if I knew I think that would have helped me -- kind of geared my resume towards, I could have worked on it more. But because I didn't know, just coming up with different cover letters for different jobs that I was applying just for -- just because I wanted to get a job, it was pretty hard.

Olivia also noted that her transition into the workforce was difficult due to her own personal financial situation that forced her to look for and accept any position in order to maintain general expenses. Shaun noted that his personal financial situation influenced his job search, prioritizing a position that could support his needs, as soon as possible, rather than holding out for a position that was more suited to his education and experience. Similarly, Jordan noted a shift in responsibility from HEI to work:

once you finish your school, you are on your own. Like, you have to pay your rent, think about your food, family, and it's, and you have to like, it's more, I'd say it's more stressful. I mean, being a student is also stressful. But it's a different stress. Like, being a student, it's more academic stress. Like, you have to finish some papers. But even if you couldn't finish it, nobody will lay off you or fire you. But in a company, like, you don't have any academic problems to solve, but you have to do things right and do a good job, and also you have to think about job security. And your salary will affect your life quality.

These personal circumstances presented real challenges in participants' abilities to integrate into HEI, as well as into the workforce post-study. Although not named by participants, their respective situations seemed to be centered on a lack of support (i.e., financial; emotional) that was needed to supplement their personal resources.

### **Misperceptions**

Seven of the 11 participants expressed that, through their transitions into and out of HEI, they encountered misperceptions they held about what higher education, Canada, and the workforce would be like. The participants had ideas about what their experiences would be like prior to engaging in them and, through living these experiences, they realized that reality was different than what they anticipated. When discussing the transition into higher education, Bobby shared that the demographics of the HEI he attended were different than his expectations:

[the first university I attended in Canada] was interesting because first of all, it wasn't the normal university you would come across, where majority of first years are just kid straight out of high school. It was mainly more like returning adults coming to school. So that really was something I didn't expect, it kind of took me back to go from learning with people your peers, people you're the same age to suddenly being in a class with somebody who's almost the same age as your mother and your father... when I first came to Canada, I always thought that there would be a lot more Caucasian people I'd run across. However, at [the second university I attended in Canada], I suddenly realized that it was a very diverse and multicultural environment, and there were kids of all races and nationalities.

Jordan also reflected that, before coming to Canada, he assumed the workforce would be predominately white people and so he was surprised when he started working and found the workplace to be highly diverse. For both Bobby and Jordan, although reality was different than what they expected, in this case, reality ended up being a positive surprise that made them, with their own diverse identities, feel welcome.

Aiko, on the other hand, shared that she had the perception that Canada would be more culturally diverse and integrated than what she encountered when she started school. Her experience was that, although there were other international students at her school, there tended to be separate groups between Canadian-born students and international students. Iris furthered Aiko's point, indicating that, before leaving Japan, what she had heard about Canada, from Canadians, was that it was a place that was welcoming to newcomers, which, in her experience was not the case, labeling it "false advertising." Specifically, Iris shared that there were fewer job opportunities for former international students as the government and employers prioritized citizens and permanent residents:

I feel like we are completely ignored and overlooked and undervalued but we are like oh Canada, the great country, come and study and... like okay but isn't that false advertising?

Bobby and Jordan also shared in this misperception about job opportunities in Canada. Jordan noted,

I found my experience is totally different from what I thought in China. Because in China when you see it on the TV... everything in Canada is great. Like, everybody can have a good job. And life looks easy. But actually when you get here, like, you can still find lots of people like they are struggling every day... So, that's very, this give me another side of the Canadian life. Like, not just like, everybody is rich, everybody is happy, everything is easy. But seeing that it can also be very hard, very difficult.

Jordan indicated that many of his perceptions came from TV and movies about Canada and the USA, which portrayed both countries as having more equitable and plentiful job opportunities than was the actual case for him. Importantly, for participants, these misperceptions influenced their experiences integrating into higher education, Canada, and the workforce. At the least, these misperceptions created shock or surprise that required a recalibration of their understanding to, at the most, a sense of disenfranchisement from Canada, HEI, and/or the workforce.

### **Language**

Almost all of the participants (i.e., 9 out of 11) noted that language, particularly English, played a role in their transition both into HEI, as well as the workforce. Of the two participants that did not mention language, Nancy and Amina, both were native English speakers. In discussing the role of language, Jordan expressed that his initial focus when he came to Canada was learning English so he could be successful in understanding course material and making meaningful interpersonal connections. Cristina shared this sentiment and indicated that language was a struggle that persisted post-study:

It was probably a shock for me to be at university learning English... I will say challenges I faced getting used to English and writing academic thing was the major one.

I still have issues with it.

Cristina further explained that before enrolling in university, she completed an English language learning program at her HEI and, even with this, she still found the transition into courses taught in English challenging. Aiko and Olivia shared that they transitioned into the Canadian education system in high school and encountered similar challenges as Cristina. Both Aiko and Olivia, however, framed this transition as an experience that made their transition into higher education less challenging. Olivia noted:



a lot of international students at [university], they kind of had a challenge with the language and what not, and that wasn't really a problem for me because I had gone to high school here. So I kind of went through that back in high school.

Shaun shared that he felt international students like himself needed to challenge themselves to learn English instead of sticking with students from a similar linguistic group as their country of origin. Despite challenging herself, Reem expressed feeling behind, compared to her Canadian-born classmates, as a result of language, and never feeling as if she caught up to them.

Beyond the academic transition, language also influenced participants' social integration. Specifically, Aiko explained that, even with a strong basis in English, she often struggled in her interactions with peers due to rapidly shifting slang and cultural references:

...social hurdles for sure was that like not understanding culture a little bit like cultural references or TV references or whatever that I'm not familiar with, yeah just getting used to the slang. I had no clue what, "what's up" meant from the little longest time.

Kelly shared in Aiko's experience, while Olivia noted that slang and cultural references were challenging for her as well, however, she found her partner, who was Canadian-born, helpful in teaching her this knowledge.

As noted earlier, language was not just an influence in participants' experiences of transitioning into higher education, but persisted post-study into the workforce. In Iris' case, even though she wanted to gain work experience, having to focus on learning English in order to understand class material kept her from having the time or energy to engage in the workforce:

like if you are international student being in school for full time, yes you can work on campus with a work permit, like who has time for that really... You are doing the education in foreign languages that you don't even speak, I don't have time for [working], we would like to get the work permit to work on campus or outside campus.

Aiko and Reem both mentioned that the learning and adapting from their transition experiences into higher education meant that they did not experience challenges due to language in their transition into the workforce. Bobby and Jordan on the other hand explained that, through their transition into the workforce, they came to understand that the English used in HEI is different than that in the workplace. Jordan shared:

Just like the way they talk and behave is different from the people I met in school. Maybe in school they all talk to you in a more nice way.

Bobby elaborated:

And their [coworkers'] vocabulary, every second word is an obscenity, everything involves yelling, like it seemed as if yelling, swearing and yelling and cursing was a good way to communicate. This was something which I hadn't heard [at university]. So every time somebody would yell at you, I would always be taken aback but to them that's just the way they talked.

For non-native English speaking participants, language was a considerable influence on their initial transition into the Canadian education system, and it continued post-study. Although all participants had successfully completed their degrees, many of them advanced degrees, in English, for some of the participants this achievement did not translate into feeling competent or confident in their English abilities. Instead, many participants continued to doubt their English skills, and worry about the implications for their continued integration into Canadian society.

## Coping

Along with discussing their challenging experiences in the transitions they underwent into and out of HEI, 10 of the 11 participants noted different ways that helped them to cope during these transitions. There were two subthemes, working with difficulty, and being flexible.

**Working with difficulty.** Instead of being overwhelmed by challenges and difficulties encountered along the way through their transitions into and out of higher education, most of the participants explicitly outlined ways in which they were able to not only overcome, but sometimes even incorporate difficulty as a powerful, even helpful, experience. Shaun noted that international students should expect that there will be difficulties in their transition both into HEI and the workforce because these are new contexts where international students will learning new systems. Shaun reflected that this is an important learning opportunity to expand beyond international students' comfort zone. Kelly went further with this idea and indicated that difficult experiences can be an opportunity for self-improvement:

Sometimes I have lunch with my lab mates... the good thing is everyone is friendly and they like to listen to me speak, even though sometimes there may be some misunderstanding. I think I have much difficulty to communicate with them... so I think it's a tough experience but I think it improves me a lot.

Kelly felt it was challenging to try to engage with her colleagues in English when she felt a lack of confidence about her language abilities; yet, despite this, she thought that going with this challenge ultimately strengthened her language skills and connections to colleagues. Olivia shared that instead of struggling existentially with an entry level position that she did not like, if she accepted that it was difficult and focused on reminding herself that it was only temporary, then she was able to live with the difficulty and put in her best work to gain experience and move into a better position. Shaun echoed Olivia's stance:

I had nothing to do [at my internship]. So I decided to stay there and work more than 4 months of internship program. But it was very temporary and I never had thought about it as a – as a career or as this is what I'm going to do. I was just you know counting days and hours till I'm done.

Shaun explained that reframing an uninspiring work situation as a temporary one, and being clear with himself that he did not consider this his career, then he was able to finish his internship and get the experience to move up in his field. Jordan, Shaun and Cristina reflected that it was persistence and patience that was helping them get through difficulty, even when the future was uncertain. Specifically, Cristina shared:

I'm not there [at my ideal job] yet, I'm still working towards it. And I have tried already multiple times. I did not get the job. But yeah, I think throughout the years it has encouraged me to like keep going. It's going to happen at one point [laughs]

For these participants, challenges and difficulties were not roadblocks that kept them from their goals, but road signs informing them of a detour along the way. By taking these detours and appreciating what they found on unexpected routes, these participants were able to continue toward their goals with a greater appreciation for the skills it took to make the journey.

**Being flexible.** As well as being able to work with challenges, participants also shared that being flexible in their goals, or the way they achieved their goals, helped them cope with difficult situations. Nancy expressed that, throughout her transition into and out of higher education, she was able to cope with uncertainty by purposefully maintaining an openness to

risk. When discussing how she managed to transition successfully into the workforce, and eventually into her desired position she noted:

I will say that one thing I think I did differently than other people was that I was more willing to risk uncertainty. So instead of getting a permanent [entry level position] and holding on to that, I kind of jumped around and tried different things so I could get more experience quickly and then actually do something that I wanted to do. So I was more of a risk taker than some of my peers.

By being flexible in the types of positions she would take on as she was transitioning into the workforce, Nancy was able to gain important work experience that made her competitive for her ideal position. Shaun, Jordan, and Iris shared that when facing difficulty, it was important to be flexible in their thinking and find ways to shift their focus onto what was important to them. For Jordan, the focus was on staying in Canada long-term and being open to trying different positions to keep him in Canada, rather than being rigid about the positions he would take. For Iris, when she was faced with unemployment after initially being employed in Canada, the focus was on what she did have control over:

I am doing stuff but not getting paid, but it is not as bad as I thought it would be because before I started [volunteering], I wouldn't call it anxious, but I was a little bummed out about the fact that I can't find anything but voluntary work and I applied for a volunteer position because I wanted to volunteer my time rather than sitting at home and doing absolutely nothing.

Iris had little control over the job market, but by shifting her focus to how she could contribute through volunteer work, not only did she find purpose in her days, but also a community with co-volunteers, and eventually, experience that got her selected for a job interview.

In reflecting upon how they were able to cope with the stress of navigating HEI demands, Iris, Bobby, and Aiko all stated that, post-study, they acknowledged being burned out and decided to take a break from their long-term career goals and go into the workforce, or return for further studies. These participants noted that being flexible to take a break allowed them to focus on their wellbeing and then re-engage in their post-study transition energetically and with a clearer purpose than if they had stubbornly maintained their original plan. Similarly, Olivia noted needing to find a balance between working and her personal life in order to cope with difficulties she faced in transitioning from higher education and into work. When taking care of themselves was not enough to cope, Amina and Reem shared that they learned to reach out to others to help them cope. Amina explained:

You have to ask, you have to make friends, you kinda just have to get out there and get things done. You know, so that you can get the tools you need to get ahead. For me one of the biggest thing for me was making friends, was important, and getting to know people in my community, and the work environment, that was something that I learned really early and I think that is one thing that helped me with my experience.

When participants were open to their paths looking differently than they expected or wanted, then they were able to be flexible in addressing their needs so that they could thrive in difficult situations.

### **Discussion**

To recap, the aim of the current study was to investigate former international students' perceptions of their transition into and out of HEI. Throughout the interviews, the participants were clear that their transition experiences (i.e., into HEI and out of HEI) were not disconnected

events, but rather part of a larger transition. For participants, there were often key experiences or learnings from the initial transition into HEI that either facilitated or impeded their transition out of it and, typically, into the workforce. In this section, we first review the superordinate themes in relation to the literature before discussing implications for policy and programs to support international students through these transitions, based on the findings in the current study. Finally, we address key limitations in the study and ideas for future research.

### **Key Superordinate Themes**

One of the superordinate themes that surfaced included the initial challenges participants experienced with their transitions into and out of higher education. This theme was the only one mentioned by all of the participants, which speaks to the ubiquitous experience of their perceived challenges. It is well documented in the literature that throughout their educational experience and beyond (e.g., Gupal, 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), international students may encounter challenges with career indecision, the immigration system, and language barriers, also noted by the participants in this study. A key finding is that the challenges shared by participants suggests that the systems they engaged in, both within educational and employment systems, lacked an international aspect and instead had a more Western influence to which students were expected to adjust. As well, these initial challenges did not just affect participants in their initial transition to higher education, but actually extended through their education, and into their post-study career transition (e.g., immigration system).

As well as initial challenges, throughout their transitions into and out of higher education, participants described instances of realizing that they held misperceptions about higher education, Canada, and the workforce. This is similar to literature indicating that misperceptions can negatively affect an experience, particularly when expectations are not met (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). In the current study, unmet expectations about the workforce in particular left some participants feeling like they had received false advertising about Canada. Another common theme in this study that is shared with the literature is that many international students struggle with language (i.e., English) concerns (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Important to note is that, even though the participants in this study were successful at obtaining their degree and jobs in English, some expressed that language continued to be a source of stress in their lives, suggesting that their perception of their English level was at least as influential as their functional level.

A final key superordinate theme was that almost all of the participants clearly noted diverse ways in which they were able to cope with some of the challenges they encountered. This is consistent with previous literature that noted international students are a highly resilient and adaptable population (Ploner, 2017). Taken together, these findings provide insights from former international students about their perceptions of challenges and ways of coping with their transitions into and out of higher education.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study there are three main implications for personnel in HEI to consider in order to improve the experience of international students. First, the messaging about what international students might expect, through the recruitment process, could be transparent and pragmatic. If international students are gaining understandings of the experience through TV and movies, they may not have expectations that appropriately reflect the actual experience. By offering a more realistic depiction of the international student experience, then HEI can take control of the narrative and can help mitigate not only challenges international

students might face, but also negative experiences due to unmet expectations (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016).

Second, the participants in this study indicated that they had to adjust to the educational system, particularly knowing which courses to take to plan for a future career direction. They also noted that HEI staff seemed to be unaware of study permit requirements and challenges faced by international students, such as homesickness. This suggests that although these HEI were successful in recruiting international students, the expertise of staff within HEI proved to have limitations about accommodating them. In order to fulfill internationalization policy, staff in HEI could focus on how well they are reaching out to international students, rather than international students solely being responsible for this adjustment. This focus could provide important support for helping international students to transition into the HEI through meeting their unique needs (Arthur, 2017).

Third, in this study participants indicated that they needed a broader scope of support from the HEI. The literature has mainly focused on how HEI can help international students adjust academically (Gopal, 2016), however, the participants in this study were clear that they needed help with personal aspects of their transition; for example, housing and immigration. Furthermore, HEI could consider the purview of help they provide international students. Specifically, the participants in this study indicated needing support not only in their initial transition to higher education but through and out of it (i.e., into the workforce). Given exclusions international students face in accessing resources off-campus due to student permit status, HEI are positioned as the primary support for international students. By ensuring that international students have the support needed to transition into and out of higher education, then international students are more likely to perceive their education as a worthwhile investment (Nada & Araújo, 2018).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

In understanding the findings and implications from the current study, it is important to also address potential limitations as well as offer ideas for future research. One limitation was that, although this study had a large sample size for a qualitative IPA study (Smith et al., 2009), the findings represent the experiences of 11 former international students. There was no intention to generalize the findings of this study. Instead, the results of the study provide in-depth insights about the career transitions of these former international students, which may illuminate aspects of other people's experiences. Further studies could continue to investigate the long-term perspectives of former international students to provide support for the insights in this study, with the aim of surfacing effective coping strategies by international students and the ways that policies and practices in HEI support them.

Another limitation is that the current study focused on the experiences of former international students who were successful in transitioning both into and out of higher education in the destination country, and does not provide insights into the experiences of those who dropped out of university, were not successful in transitioning to the workforce, or who returned to their country of origin for work. Future research could address this limitation by focusing on the experiences of former international students who struggle to successfully transition into and out of higher education, as well as those who decided to return to their country of origin, or elsewhere, for work. These studies would provide a comprehensive understanding of former international students' transition experiences.

### Conclusion

The current study examined how former international students made sense of their transitions into and out of higher education. The participants indicated that there were key initial challenges that were shared in both their transition into and then out of higher education including navigating new systems (e.g., healthcare) in Canada, and their own personal circumstances (e.g., lack of career direction). Participants also shared that misperceptions about Canada, higher education, and the workforce influenced their transition experiences. Furthermore, language, particularly English level competence, was at times a barrier to the participants' transitions. Finally, participants noted ways in which they were able to cope with challenges, misperceptions, and barriers to their transitions (e.g., being flexible in finding ways to achieve their goals).

Given the growing attention paid to the recruitment of international students (OECD, 2018), the findings of this study offer important considerations for faculty and student services staff who work in HEI settings. As the population of international students increases, effective and appropriate policies and programs to support international students' transitions into and out of higher education will be needed in order to address their unique needs (Loo et al., 2017). By addressing these needs, international students may be better equipped to navigate these transitions, creating a more successful and worthwhile educational experience for them.

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**Manuscript 6**

In the next manuscript, I focused on the superordinate themes of career choices and work experience in the university-to-work experience. Participants described these two superordinate themes as being important influences on their career development throughout the transition. Specifically, as I asked questions about their university-to-work transition, participants reflected on how they made sense of the influences that brought them to where they were at the time of interview. Participants shared experiences about how they made choices related to their career, and the influence that trying out different roles had on their subsequent exploration; hence, their experiences contained influences for a feedback loop. The themes in this manuscript serve as a follow-up to the second manuscript presented in Chapter 2 that emphasized a re-examination of career development theories. Specifically, in the manuscript, I position Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006, 2014), with its focus on influences shaping career choices, as one approach for understanding the complex career development experience of these former international student participants.

**Statement of contribution.** I independently wrote the original work in this manuscript with the support of my primary supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur. This manuscript has co-authorship due to the collaborative conceptualization of the ideas between Dr. Arthur and myself.

## Former International Students' Perspectives on Their Career Choices and Work Experience

### Jon Woodend & Nancy Arthur

Over the past 20 years, the number of international students attending foreign universities has increased from two million to five million (OECD, 2018). Part of what has driven this marked increase is the joint efforts of academic institutions and governments in countries with highly developed economies to recruit international students (Falcone, 2017; Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). For the former, this recruitment is essential to their social and economic aims of supplementing revenue and diversify campuses (Falcone, 2017). For the latter, this recruitment helps to address declining domestic birthrates and continue to grow the economy through adding skilled labour to the workforce (Scott et al., 2015). These macro and organizational influences set the context for an examination of international student experiences in higher education and in the local communities, while they study and post-graduation.

International students tend to view education in countries with highly developed economies as a long-term career development opportunity (Chen, 2017). Many students want to stay in the destination country for employment post-graduation, and may be considering pursuing permanent immigration (Dorsett, 2017). Although recruiting international students both into universities and post-study as skilled workers is a priority for many governments, policies and practices may not always be congruent, which can result in consequences for international students (i.e., under- or un-employment), and defeat the aims of these educational and immigration policies (Scott et al., 2015; Woodend & Arthur, 2018). For example, Loo, Luo, and Ye (2017) noted that, even with local education and experience, international students often experience barriers to entering the workforce, relative to their domestic-born peers. When international students face challenges successfully transitioning to the workforce this could affect their perceptions of the value of their education to prepare them for post-study life (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Serious concerns may surface if universities develop a reputation of lacking support for international students to be successful. This could deter students from seeking a foreign education, which is often a costly investment (Chen, 2017). Furthermore, when international students face difficulty moving into the workforce then it leaves these highly skilled professionals in un- or under-employment, which defeats governmental economic objectives (Scott et al, 2015).

In addressing the challenges international students face transitioning into the workforce, it is important to consider that international students are a diverse group of people from a wide range of countries of origin, whose career development may have unique aspects (Arthur, 2016). Given the role of education as a career development opportunity, the role international students in social and economic development, and the role of diversity considerations for appropriate interventions, there is an impetus to re-examine researchers' and practitioners' understandings of career development. This re-examination is crucial in ensuring that practitioners are engaging with international students using appropriate and effective interventions to address their needs (Smith, Whiteside, Blanchard, & Martin, 2016).

In the context of growing markets for international education, the experiences of students in their pursuits of employment and permanent immigration are important perspectives for understanding influences on their career development (Arthur, 2016). As such, the current study sought to understand the university-to-work transition of former international students. Specifically, we start by providing an overview of international students' career development, and then move into a description of the study, before outlining the key findings and offering

implications for career practitioners. We finish with considerations for limitations and future research directions.

### **International Students' Career Development and Choices**

As post-secondary education is an important component of one's career development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is surprising that there have been few studies looking at the career development of international students (Arthur & Nunes, 2014), particularly given the increase in the international student population (OECD, 2018). Certainly, international students and domestic students have overlap in their career development (e.g., making choices about degrees and majors related to long-term career goals; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). At the same time, it is important to note that, historically, career development theories were largely developed with a predominately Western, white, and male population, which may not reflect the lived experiences of the highly diverse international student population (Flores, 2014). For instance, traditional career development theories conceptualized a static career choice, where the individual determines one's workplace fit for life (Savickas, & Baker, 2005). For international students, they may face ongoing career choices (e.g., different positions/fields) and consider those choices in different contexts (e.g., destination country and country of origin; Arthur & Nunes, 2014). Specific research into their career development is necessary, then, in order to ensure that career practitioners are using appropriate and effective conceptualizations, as well interventions.

Researchers who have examined international students' career development have mainly focused on current international students and their experiences in study or preparing for a career post-study (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). From this research, international students are concerned about gaining local work experience, deciding whether or not to remain in the destination country post-study, their immigration status, and opportunities for advancing their international education or employment in different countries (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Scott et al., 2015). Importantly, there is some evidence suggesting that, particularly for international students from more collectivist cultures, career choices are made in the context of the family (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). This is in contrast to many career development theories and interventions that center the individual and their personal preferences in making career choices (McMahon & Patton, 2019). As well, research indicates that international students may lack an understanding of the local workforce customs, interviewing styles and job search (e.g., cover letter; Blackmore, Gribble, & Rahimi, 2017). This gap in understanding can be exacerbated by a lack of local career role models, and social network (e.g., family) to help the international students in making the transition from university to work (Balin, Anderson, Chudasama, Kanagasingam, & Zhang, 2016).

International students often indicate that their perceptions of how the university will prepare them to gain work experience influenced their decision regarding which university to attend (Dorsett, 2017). Despite this emphasis on gaining work experience, international students are often underrepresented in cooperative and internship programs relative to their peers (Jackson, 2017). Tran and Soejatminah (2017) suggested that these work experience programs are typically added onto a degree, and, for international students, this would extend their degree and require spending additional time and money. This additional cost can make international students hesitant to sign on for these important work experiences. Moreover, many students who do participate find that local employers are less likely to hire them than their domestic peers

(Tran, 2013). As such, Tran and Soejatminah noted that many international students tend to indicate they are dissatisfied with their work experience preparation from university.

Given the importance of work experience in obtaining meaningful employment for international and domestic students alike (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017), it is surprising that there are few studies looking at former international students' university-to-work transition (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Instead, many studies looking at how students move from university-to-work are based on domestic, local students' experiences (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). The conceptualizations and interventions that practitioners derive from these studies may not appropriately reflect the experiences and needs of international students. Importantly, although it is helpful to understand international students' career preparation experiences, long-term perspectives of international students' experiences moving from university to the workforce are needed. This retrospective on their career transitions would help to inform policy and practice for supporting international students' career development.

**Systems Theory Framework.** As noted earlier, traditional and dominant career development theories (e.g., Holland's Vocational Types) were developed on societal influences and demographics that are different from today's world of work (Flores, 2014). A more recent career development approach, Systems Theory Framework (STF; McMahon & Patton, 2019), specifically focuses on the continuous and iterative influences on career development, which helps to contextualize choices made in the past, present, and future, and the meaning individuals give to these choices. STF is one way of conceptualizing former international students' career development, in particular their university-to-work transition, through understanding the shifting influences in their lives that form their career choices and subsequent work experiences. Patton and McMahon (2014) noted that influences in STF include time, social positioning (e.g., socioeconomic status, geographical location) and culture (e.g., gender, ethnicity). Patton and McMahon divided influences on career development into either content or process influences. Content influences include intrapersonal variables (e.g., personality, interests, values) and process influences include recursive interactions between individuals and their social networks and environment.

In making sense of how these complex influences interact and shape each other, Patton and McMahon envisioned three interdependent systems in STF. At the center is the individual system (e.g., age, abilities, sexual orientation). Then there are two contextual subsystems that overlap and interact with the individual system: a) the social subsystem (e.g. social network), and b) the environmental/societal subsystem (e.g., geographical location, socio-economic status). Overlapping both the individual and contextual system is the process system (e.g., time and chance). How these three systems interactions with each other narrow an individual's available and salient career choices. Although considering these influences is complex, the complexity provides nuance and depth to understand career choices. For international students who have multiple geographical, societal, and cultural influences, this systemic theory approach may offer an appropriate way of conceptualizing their university-to-work experiences (Arthur, 2016).

### **Current Study**

The current study investigated former international students' perceptions of their university-to-work transitions using STF (McMahon & Patton, 2019) as the framework for understanding their experiences. Specifically, the overarching research question of the current study was, How do former international students make sense of their university-to-work transition? In this section

we describe the research method used in the current study, including the participants, and the procedure and data analysis followed.

### **Research Method**

As the current study sought to explore former international students' experiences, we chose a qualitative approach, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Smith (2017), IPA draws upon the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology and hermeneutics to investigate how participants make sense of their lived experiences through their subjective interpretations about the world. IPA also has an idiographic focus, which centers the individual's perspective, rather than seeking to create universal understandings. IPA researchers use interviews to engage with participants and elicit rich descriptions of their experiences and how they make sense of these experiences. In the case of this study, participants described and interpreted their experiences transitioning from university to the workforce.

### **Research Design**

In carrying out the current study, we first applied for and received ethics approval from our institution of affiliation. We then contacted student services offices (i.e., alumni services, international student services, career services) at universities across Canada and invited them to share a recruitment poster for the study with former international students whom they thought might be interested in participating. Once we started interviewing participants, we also invited those participants to share with any of their connections who they thought might be interested and eligible (i.e., snowball sampling).

To be eligible to participate in the study, the participant had to have been an international student in Canada (i.e., on a study permit in university), graduated more than two but less than five years ago, and living and working in Canada at the time of the study. These criteria were important as our aim was to investigate the university-to-work transition, requiring that there be some time post-study in order for the transition to occur, but not so long that the transition was difficult to remember. If a participant was eligible, then we engaged in an hour long, semi-structured interview either in-person or via telephone/Skype. The interviews included a demographic questionnaire (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), as well as questions specific to the university-to-work transition. Each participant received a \$25 gift card in appreciation of their time.

**Participants.** Eleven participants responded to the recruitment poster and were eligible for this study. All of the participants indicated they were former international students who attended Canadian universities, had graduated between three and five years ago, and were currently living in Canada. Demographic details are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Details*

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Country of Origin	Years in Canada	Highest Degree	Field of Study	Year Post-Graduation	Years Employed in Canada
P1	Aiko	Female	29	Asian	Japan	14	Master's	Sociology/ Psychology	3rd	1.5
P2	Amina	Female	30	East African (Indian)	Tanzania	11	Bachelor's	Health Management	5th	4
P3	Bobby	Male	28	African (Black)	Zimbabwe	9	Bachelor's	Health Science	4th	3
P4	Cristina	Female	24	Latina	Venezuela	7.5	Bachelor's	International Relations	3rd	3
P5	Iris	Female	37	Asian	Japan	15	Master's	Social Work	4th	1
P6	Jordan	Male	26	Asian	China	5.5	Master's	Engineering	4th	3
P7	Kelly	Female	27	Asian	China	5	Master's	Biology	4th	2
P8	Nancy	Female	53	White	USA	8	Master's	Nursing	4th	7
P9	Olivia	Female	25	Asian	Korea	11	Bachelor's	Neuroscience	4th	3
P10	Reem	Female	27	Indian	Bahrain	9	Master's	Business/ Psychology	3rd	1.25
P11	Shaun	Male	32	Middle Eastern	Iran	8	Master's	Engineering	5th	7

## Data Analysis

Following the interviews, a professional transcriber, who signed an oath of confidentiality, transcribed them verbatim and then the authors used Smith et al. (2009)'s data analysis process. The data analysis consisted of six steps: a) step one, we read and re-read an individual transcript; b) step two, we created initial coding for that same, one transcript; c) step three, we generated emergent themes amongst the initial codes for the same, one transcript; d) step four, we looked for connections amongst the emerging themes in the same, one transcript; e) step five, we moved to the next transcript and completed steps one through four; and f) step six, we looked for patterns in the themes across all transcripts. In creating these superordinate themes, we engaged in abstraction (i.e., finding like ideas across themes), contextualization (i.e., finding ideas with cultural or narrative aspects), function (i.e., looking at the role the idea plays), numeration (i.e., noting the frequency of an idea), polarization (i.e., seeing where ideas diverge), and subsumption (i.e., combining and finding a hierarchy of ideas).

## Findings

There were two superordinate themes that emerged from the data, each with subthemes. Table 2 provides an overview of the superordinate themes and subthemes, as well as an indication of which participants contributed to each subtheme. In this section, we describe each of the superordinate themes and subthemes, and provide participant quotations in order to support the inclusion and rationale of the themes.

Table 2

### *Overview of Themes from Data Analysis*

Superordinate Theme	Contributing Participants										
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Career Choices											
Exploration & Exposure	X		X	X	X				X	X	X
Ruling Options Out	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Family Influence	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Assumptions	X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X
Work Experience											
Types of Positions											
Volunteering	X			X	X					X	
Entry-Level	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Value of Experience											
Career Mobility	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Making Ends Meet		X	X		X	X	X		X		X

### Career Choices

When discussing their university-to-work transition, participants repeatedly returned to the idea of choice points throughout their university and into work experiences. They noted that the choices they made in regards to their careers were ongoing and influenced by their experiences. There were two processes that they identified using to help with making their career choices, exploration-exposure and ruling options out.

**Exploration and exposure.** Seven of the 11 participants noted engaging in some form of career exploration in which exposure to different areas helped determine the path they were currently on or aiming for. This exploration and exposure was important because some participants would not have considered these career options otherwise. This was the case for

Reem and Aiko who, before coming to Canada, were not aware of Psychology, or the potential job options with a Psychology degree. Reem indicated:

I didn't even know there were other options; because in Bahrain they don't really transition you towards -- you just do your exams in your school. You don't really think about career... I took an elective first year of psychology and I really, really liked psychology. I never thought that would be a thing. I thought I would take a minor. But I loved it so much...

Reem shared that in her country of origin, she only thought of careers of the adults in her life (e.g., engineering, accounting), and it was not until she was exposed to options through university elective courses that she discovered alternative options. Bobby and Olivia echoed this by indicating that they came to university with the goal of pursuing a career in medicine; however, after taking some non-medical related courses, Bobby found he was more interested in pursuing diplomacy, while Olivia discovered she was not sure what direction she would like to pursue. For Cristina, her career focus shifted as a result of discovering she was disinterested in the courses needed for her original plan of pursuing an education degree. Exposure to education courses sent her on a path of exploring other options that would be more interesting to her.

As well as educational exposure, participants noted that exposure to work-like experiences also influenced their career exploration. Cristina shared:

I got involved with [international student services]--I really find a passion about international students. And being the coordinator for the mentorship program as a student, it made me realize that. And so my goal is to work for [international student services].

Bobby furthered this idea, noting that he had never considered trades positions as a career option until he took on a summer job with a construction firm. Through this experience, he realized that he was good at this work, that it offered a liveable wage, and that he could do it permanently rather than just for the summer. Iris also found that when she accepted a temporary job in a similar field in her home country post-study, that she did not need to be in a position directly affiliated with her degree in order to still use her skills and be interested in it. Shaun had a different experience and explained that, after getting laid off and struggling to find another job in his field, he started working on an entrepreneurial project with some colleagues. Although he meant to be in this project temporarily, Shaun discovered that the project was more appealing to him than finding a way back to engineering:

when I was an entrepreneur and I was working at that project, I really wanted to you know to pursue it. I didn't want to go back to engineering, that's why I for -- I would say between 6 or 7 months I never applied for a job during that time, because I was very focused and I was very busy, dealing with that job and I wanted to make something out of it. And I did my best. It is still ongoing.

For participants, there was a cyclical and complementary influence between exploration and exposure, with exposure leading to exploration, which lead to further exposure to different career options. This iterative process honed interests, and broadened the scope of viable career options.

**Ruling options out.** Eight of the 11 participants mentioned a process of continuously ruling career options out throughout their education and into the workforce. Whether they ruled out options depended on participants' personal preferences and threshold for what they would and would not tolerate in pursuing a particular option. Reem indicated that she ruled out business as a career option after she acknowledged that she found it monotonous working with numbers,



regardless of her aptitude for it, and that she needed to work with people. Cristina had a similar experience when, after attending a Canadian history class, decided she found the content uninteresting:

I didn't give Canadian studies a second opportunity, I'll just put it that way (laughs). I just took one class, I hated it and it was like, you know what, I'm done with it, I'm going to change majors, and so I did.

When deciding what major to pursue in university, Olivia reflected:

I just didn't think as compared to some other people who wanted to go – go into med school like that's not – I didn't want to go there that badly. And I knew it was a pretty hard path like it's long, it costs money, you really have to have dedication and felt like I didn't have what it required.

Olivia thought about the time, money, and passion required to go into medicine, her original and long held career goal, and did not think she was willing to commit the resources necessary to be successful at it, thus ruling it out. Kelly had a similar experience as Olivia in that, when deciding what to do post-study of her master's degree, she ruled out options more aligned with her field because she believed they required a doctoral degree, which was something that she knew she was not interested in pursuing. Aiko, likewise, ruled out research, and subsequently her idea to do a doctoral degree because she felt it was beyond her skill.

Although Nancy had always seen herself in a non-profit organization, once she got a position in the government, she quickly ruled out seeking other programs as she felt this was the best possible option. Bobby, Iris, and Reem, in contrast, expressed that they ruled out continuing in positions because they did not appreciate how they were treated in the workplace (i.e., unrealistic workload, lack of collegiality). Iris explained:

So when I talked to the supervisors at the main office about the performance review, I was actually quite shocked to find out that, how undervalued I was... So I just didn't feel like staying there anymore. I didn't bother even talking to them about extending my employment because I just didn't have a positive experience with those staff, client and other people. I didn't care for it, I didn't want to do anything to do with it.

Even though neither Bobby, Reem, nor Iris had other positions arranged to move into, they ruled out continuing in these positions. For Iris, she did not enjoy the position so not only did she rule out working with this one organization, but more generally the type of position she was in. Reem enjoyed her position and sought to find a similar one at a different organization. Bobby had a different approach in that, although he enjoyed his position, due to the way he was treated, he ruled out the field he was in and sought a position in a different one.

For participants, it seemed that career choices were easier to make by refining their career direction though continuously ruling out options than by ruling in and committing to one choice. Through this ruling out process, participants honed their interests and workplace preferences, leading them to current positions or directions that felt more like a fit to them right now.

**Family influence.** One influence on participants' career choices that was shared amongst them all was their family, including parents, siblings, and partners. For Bobby and Aiko, their father and mother, respectively, encouraged them to seek education in Canada, thinking that it would allow more opportunities both in terms of their education, as well as future career prospects. Bobby shared:

my dad moved out here, he moved a lot earlier like four years before we came, and he gave me the opportunity to come to Canada. I was like, "Well, I'll go and experience it

but I don't know if I'll go to school, stay there and live my life." Canada was never really on my radar of places I could see myself living in. So it was kind of a decision which was really more like, okay, well I've been given this opportunity, I'll take it and I will play it by ear once I'm there. As I progressed further in my degree and I guess in my stay in Canada, I certainly did realize well I kind of like it here and it's probably a place I can see myself working.

Aiko and Bobby's parents also encouraged them to stay in Canada post-study to gain work experience. Aiko reflected:

I guess it was my mom again, she was like why would you kind of limit yourself and like in that country [country of origin] where you have the options here at this point and I was like – I never really thought of *staying* staying but I mean that might not be a bad idea to continue here in Canada

For Aiko, choosing to study and then work in Canada resulted in her picking a profession, psychology, which she felt she would not have chosen if she studied in her country of origin as the profession is not as well established there. For Bobby and Aiko, their reflections shared a gratitude for their family's help in making these decision that, alone, they would likely not have made.

Shaun and Olivia both chose their respective fields based on the advice of their fathers, who they noted were their role models in similar fields that they chose to study. In contrast to Bobby and Aiko's situation, Shaun and Olivia explained that their fathers' advice did not end up aligning with their own preferences, and they ultimately chose different, but related directions. For Amina and Cristina, they each had a brother who went to study in Canada before them. Both Amina and Cristina noted that their brothers' experiences offered a template for their own, and made attending university in Canada an easy choice. Amina explained:

My brother had already lived the international student life. Just cause it [the brother's experience] kinda cleared the path, right, I kind of knew the ins and outs and stuff, because he said, you're going to do this, this is what you're going to do.

Cristina's brother being in Canada not only influenced her decision to study in Canada, but also to stay post-study as she wanted to have a career somewhere that she had family to support her both personally and professionally.

Jordan and Reem experienced some difficulties in pursuing their preferred career and they indicated that, if they had not received support and encouragement from their families, then they would have abandoned their current direction and pursued a different one. Jordan shared:

my family like, they have been pretty supportive. Like, they, no matter what I do, they will always support. They don't know, they don't have the same experiences like you. Like, when you get laid off, it's very hard to describe your feelings to other people. Only you know, only you know like what you should do, but my family members, they are very supportive, so I don't have anything like affecting me.

The families of these former international students influenced their career choice by enabling them to persevere through difficulty to achieve their goals. Olivia and Iris had similar experiences, except that it was their partners who provided encouragement through difficulty. Partners also played a key role in influencing career decisions around where to work post-study. For Olivia, Iris, Aiko, Reem, and Amina, they originally planned to return to their countries of origin to work, however, they entered relationships with Canadian-born people, or in Kelly's

case her partner decided he would stay in Canada, and this influenced their decision to stay and start their own families. Reem shared:

[at the end of undergraduate] I had to make a decision – I was dating my boyfriend at that time and I said I have been with him for four years, I want to be with him. And I want to be with him for long-term and it seems like this is going somewhere and I want to marry him anyways, he didn't have a choice really (laughs).

For Reem and others, the personal decision about whether or not to continue in their romantic relationships influenced their decision about where they would continue their career. Nancy shared that family did not have a direct influence on her career decision; however, she specifically indicated that, when deciding where to study and live in Canada, she strategically chose a city that would be an easy flight to visit her family as needed.

Although not explicitly stated by the participants, they implied that their partners could not, or would not move to the participants' country of origin, and, therefore, the choice was ultimately theirs to make. From participants' reflections, family played a role in their career choices from where they would seek education or their career, to what major and field they would pursue. For most of the participants, family was a supportive influence that pushed them to consider options they might not have otherwise.

**Assumptions about future careers.** Another area that eight of eleven participants identified as influencing their career choices was assumptions that they held about their future careers. For Aiko, Reem, Olivia, Shaun, and Amina, there was an assumption when they started university in Canada that, post-study, they would return to their country of origin. Aiko noted that it never crossed her mind that she would not live near her parents. Reem shared that it was expected of her to live with her parents until marriage and that she assumed this is what she would do, stating:

It was never an option [to stay in Canada], I always thought I would study and I go home, where else would I go, its home right? The plan was always to go back home.

Particularly because I'm a girl, so if you're a girl you're not going to just settle on your own, you have to be with family, so there was no option of me saying hey, I bought an apartment or something that would be ridiculous. I have to be with a man or go back home to be with my mom and dad. It was not even questioned because it's how – I can't be on my own, I needed – there's a dependency piece. So I couldn't be on my own.

Both Aiko and Reem were clear that their assumption they would return home post-study to further their careers was not just a cultural or parental expectation, but was also a personal one as they valued closeness to their families. Amina's situation was different in that her family encouraged her to pursue whatever career she wanted, wherever she wanted, and it was actually Amina's desire to support her local community that inspired her to seek the best education possible so she could return post-study to give back. She shared:

I come from a country where public health is a major issue, hospitals are an issue. Health was a big focus for me and I always wanted to sort of work in an environment where I could sort of see healthcare improve. So I wanted to have a management focus. You know, quite honestly, when I was at university my goals were really to get a health management degree and to go back. I never had the intention to stay here.

For Olivia, although she acknowledged that currently she was in, and planned to stay in Canada, she had not completely let go of the assumption that, one day, she would return to her country of origin. Aiko shared a similar thought, noting that, although she had permanent resident status in

Canada, she was not going to give up Japanese citizenship for Canadian citizenship because part of her still assumed she would return one day.

Another common assumption amongst the participants was the specific profession that they would move into post-study. Shaun shared that he came to Canada to pursue engineering in order to fulfill his “childhood dream.” He reflected that he did not question this childhood dream until he was post-study and working in the field, when he realized that this direction was possibly not the best fit for him. Amina, Iris, and Bobby also came to Canada based on early ideas of what they would like to do as part of their careers. For Amina and Bobby, the assumption of what they would do shifted during study, as well as when they entered the workforce. For Iris it was experiences in the workforce that narrowed her “dream” and inspired her to return to university for a post-graduate degree. While most had general ideas of what they wanted to do, Jordan had a specific and straightforward assumption of what he would do:

I was studying petroleum engineering at the time the oil price is still like 120 dollars a barrel, so the students before me, they graduate before me, and they have no problem to find a job, so my goal is to like find a petroleum engineering job in an oil company.

That’s my career goal at the time.

For Jordan, when he encountered an economic downturn in the industry post-study, his assumption that he would move into this specific position was challenged, and he struggled to adapt to a different plan.

For participants, assumptions about where they would pursue their career and what they would pursue shaped their choices. For many, these assumptions provided a clear path for participants, which propelled them through challenges as they kept their focus on what they wanted. Through their experiences, however, participants had to question whether or not these assumptions were still serving them, and if they needed to let them go to pursue what they wanted now. Participants did not explicitly note that they held assumptions that their career would be linear, however, they implied that they came to learn that their career would not move in a straightforward manner.

### **Work Experience**

A critical part of the university-to-work transition is gaining a position within the workforce. When discussing their university-to-work transition, participants identified a variety of different ways in which they gained work experience and what those experiences meant for them and their careers.

**Types of positions.** For participants, gaining work experience was not as simple as getting a job in their chosen field. These different work options provided pathways into the Canadian workforce.

**Volunteering.** One of the ways in which participants gained Canadian workplace experience was through volunteering. Four out of 11 participants indicated that this was, to them, a valuable way of gaining experience in a particular field. Aiko noted that she volunteered for a research team at an organization with which she was interested in eventually gaining full time employment. Aiko shared:

I kind of felt like okay, I need to do something and then that’s when I found the volunteer position and at that point my parents were supporting me so I wasn’t financially in a huge rush to look for jobs and I knew I wanted to get into psychology related things but you really needed a lot of experience for that

For Aiko, with the support of her parents, she was able to engage in volunteering directly in her field, which she thought would be helpful, given her understanding that employment positions within Psychology fields require experience. Reem had a similar experience in that she applied for a graduate program immediately after her undergraduate degree but did not get accepted due to a lack of practical experience in the field. Reem then spent the year volunteering in the field to gain this experience that was inaccessible to her through formal employment.

For Cristina, she had heard that Canadian work experience, not just course grades, was important to be successful in the workforce. Cristina explained:

Well, I've been hearing throughout the campus and friends that usually when you graduate you have to have experience beforehand, and if you don't have experience it will make finding a job after you're done more difficult. So that was initially why I decided to do my summer [volunteer] job.

Not having previous entry-level work experience, particularly in the Canadian context, and having restrictions due to her study permit, Cristina decided to volunteer with an organization of interest to gain this experience, while also figuring out her work permit. After graduating from her undergraduate degree, Iris immediately entered the Canadian workforce. She later returned to university for a graduate degree and when she graduated the second time, she found that competition for positions was high and employers did not consider her previous experience as sufficiently related to the field she wanted to enter, which made her less competitive. Iris shared:

After graduating with my Master's... I needed to find something... So I figured out my options what I can do and then I decided [to volunteer] for year

Iris saw volunteering as an alternative way to gain experience in her field, rather than continue to apply for jobs, unsuccessfully. For Aiko, Iris, Reem, and Cristina, although they all had goals of gaining paid employment or entry into a graduate program, volunteering was one way that they could get into the Canadian workforce to getting relevant work experience.

**Entry-level.** Nine of the 11 participants shared that, post-study, they moved into entry-level positions. For Kelly, Shaun, Reem, and Aiko, their post-study careers started with internship positions in their fields. Reem and Aiko's internships were a formal part of attaining their professional designations and so, for them, the internship experience felt meaningful and as an expected stepping stone into their ideal positions. For Kelly and Shaun, their internships did not feel as applicable to attaining their ideal position. Kelly noted:

I did an internship in Calgary for three months... It wasn't that useful because I think I'm not very suitable for that position. I am just looking for an industry job. And so that's why I wanted to have an internship. But, when I was there, I found that I was still not doing that job... I just want to find some job at the master's level that I can do.

For Kelly and Shaun, the internship process was one that they tried to get through as quickly as possible so that they could move on to a better position.

Jordan, Nancy, Amina, Olivia, and Bobby shared that, instead of internships, they moved into entry-level positions that were typically not commensurate to their education, and sometimes not in a relevant field. Bobby and Jordan shared that they took a series of positions that were unrelated to their education (i.e., construction and retail, respectively), so that they could get paid work experience in Canada. Amina noted that she took an entry-level position that was not commensurate to her education. She explained:

I had the [entry-level] job, which was a great, great, great experience. But I think that the job, I sort of settled for quicker than sort of waiting for the government job, because it

just seemed like I didn't want to wait too long being unemployed. So that may be something that I always ask myself, did I take that job because I didn't want to wait? For Amina, the idea of being unemployed seemed more detrimental to her career than waiting and securing a more ideal position. Olivia indicated that she was in a "bottom-feeder" position because she did not have the experience to accompany her education. Moreover, she was on a work permit and indicated that employers prioritize Canadian citizens and permanent residents for the full-time positions. Nancy echoed Olivia's point, sharing that post-study she moved into precarious positions (i.e., contract, part-time).

For participants, although they would have preferred positions that were directly related to their education, work experience, whether it was volunteer, internship, or entry-level positions, were a key step in their career development. How they got their work experience and in what area seemed to be of lesser importance than being able to list Canadian experience for their future applications.

**Value of experience.** The participants in this study viewed the purpose of work experience in a few different, but important ways. Work experience played an important part of supporting their lives including increasing mobility between positions, and making ends meet for their day-to-day needs.

**Career mobility.** For all of the participants, Canadian work experience was an important way to improve their career mobility. Jordan and Kelly talked about their first jobs in Canada, which were not related to their field, as helpful in developing general skills including customer service and Canadian workplace customs. Without this experience, Jordan and Kelly thought they would not have been as successful moving into their current positions, as they would have had a steeper learning curve. Olivia, Bobby, and Iris had a similar thought, noting that their Canadian-born peers usually already had some Canadian work experience before they graduated, which helped with the transition into the workforce. Olivia shared:

I think for a lot of people that grew up in Canada they work at least like a fast-food place or retail and I think compared to those people that had – even if it's not like a great experience, they have experience, whereas opposed to me, I didn't have any experience outside of school, so that was a little bit of struggle.

For Iris, she noted that during university she thought it was important to focus her time and energy on schoolwork. She explained that, post-study, she learned that employers wanted prospective employees to have some work experience along with their education in order to be competitive for entry-level jobs in her field. Olivia went a step further than Iris and expressed a desire for her program to have included a co-op or internship so that she would be able to get her education and work experience. Amina, in contrast, started working part-time soon after arriving in Canada to study. She explained:

I was like, you could have on-campus jobs no problem. I mean, it was easy for me... I mean from a study perspective, I don't think it was an impact, because I probably didn't watch as much TV as any other student, because I was working.

Amina found that working while studying helped her to feel more integrated in the campus and broader community, and gave her the general Canadian work experience she needed to move into a position in her field post-study. For Amina, this general experience was a "foot in the door" in the Canadian workforce. Cristina and Aiko shared this thought, mentioning how a volunteer position leveraged their ability to get paid employment. Cristina elaborated:

After a year of volunteering at this office, the summer position came up, I applied. I worked for the four months. My manager at the time decided to keep me for my last year [of study] working part-time. So that's what I did and so that really helped me get the [full-time] job that I got after I graduated.

Nancy had a similar experience in that she struggled initially to get a position in the healthcare system, however, once she was in, she found it easy to move into different positions within the system, thanks to the entry-level work experience.

Although they ultimately decided to stay and work in Canada, at least for the time being, Bobby, Shaun, Amina, Jordan, and Reem all indicated that Canadian work experience would not just be useful in the Canadian workforce, but also if they returned to their countries of origin to work. Jordan shared:

Even in China, like if you study in like Canada or US, or you worked in Canada or US, like you're very much higher than people that never study outside or never work in other countries. And also I think if you just study here and you don't have any work experience, it's not a complete experience. Like you need to have first some Canadian experience.

For Shaun, who already had international work experience, he found that the reverse was not true; that is, he had the impression that Canadian employers did not value his international work experience. He reported having to build his work experience anew once in Canada in order to have mobility within the Canadian workforce.

For participants, going beyond a good education experience and having at least general Canadian work experience, even if it was volunteering, was key to eventually securing a more relevant position. Through these work experiences, participants learned about the Canadian workforce, which also helped to ease the learning curve of their transition into employment.

***Making ends meet.*** For seven of the eleven participants, work experience served the more basic function of supporting them financially. Amina took on summer jobs during university in order to help pay tuition so she could remain in Canada, and afford the Canadian lifestyle. Bobby had a similar experience, noting that he had to forgo more relevant experiences to ensure he could afford living in Canada. He shared:

Majority of my classmates were able to do summer research projects or essentially take the summer off to relax. But I had to try and actually go work so then I could afford to come back to school next year.

This financial stress affecting relevant work experience continued post-study for Olivia who accepted the first job she was offered because she needed to be "financially independent". Kelly also noted that she accepted the first job she was offered, even though it was not in her field, because she was worried about being unemployed and not having financial security. Jordan found there were no job openings in his field when he graduated. He reflected:

Actually, at the beginning of my graduation [it was] so hard to find a job... But I have to survive first. So I think maybe I start from Walmart because I start from some part-time jobs. So I applied at Walmart, Superstore, everywhere. So, then I got a call from Walmart so I start work as a cashier. So, after one month, I still didn't get any like job in oil and gas. But the Walmart, they pay like minimum salary.

Shaun also took his first job opportunity post-study; however, this position was somewhat in his field. He shared though that he quickly learned that he disliked the position, but felt he had to stay in it to maintain his lifestyle, rather than risk trying to find a position that was a better fit.

After a year, Shaun was laid off from his position when there was a downturn in the market, and he, like Jordan, had to move into underemployment in order to pay bills.

Iris, who had recently been laid off, shared that she was looking for positions outside of her field because all she was seeing were part-time, contract positions paying minimum wage. She noted that Canadian-born peers in her program did not have the same struggle to meet day-to-day needs due to support from their partners. She shared:

the situations [they are in] are quite different for me, most of them are married. Their partner, usually husbands, makes decent amount of money. So they are not financially struggling in any way possible, so even though my friend take the not so well paying job, it doesn't hurt them in anyway. So they can be little bit more choosy meaning they can look for jobs that they are more interested in rather than specifically looking at, what's the payment? I wish I can kind of follow through what I want to do but knowing that option is not really available for me.

For the participants in this study who did not mention needing to prioritize meeting these day-to-day expenses over relevant work experience, Reem, Aiko, and Cristina echoed Iris' point in that they had the financial support of parents, or a partner. This support meant that they could wait for positions that would more directly related to their long-term career goals.

Although all participants knew that Canadian work experience was critical for securing relevant employment, some had to prioritize basic needs for supporting themselves. This prioritization temporarily stalled the pursuit of their long-term career goals, but helped to ensure that they remained in Canada in order to pursue these goals at a later date.

### **Discussion**

The overarching aim of this study was to investigate former international students' perceptions about their university-to-work transition. In this section we first summarize the key findings before presenting some implications for practice. We then note some limitations to the study and ideas for future research directions.

To recap, there were two superordinate themes that emerged from the data. First, the participants noted that the iterative process between exploration of options, exposure to different ideas, and then exploration of these different ideas influenced their career choices. At the same time, participants shared that they were continuously engaging in choices by ruling out options and honing in on particular career paths that best suited their particular situation. Importantly, these choices changed over time, as their life circumstances shifted (e.g., being laid off). Second, participants explained that they gained work experience in a variety of ways, including volunteering, and entry-level positions. Through these work experiences, they were able to gain mobility in their career, to more secure or relevant positions. These work experiences also provided a way for them to make ends meet, when needed, which sometimes stalled pursuing opportunities that would advance their careers.

Previous research also noted the importance of work experience in supporting international students to support themselves and stay in the destination country post-study, as well as being key to career mobility (Balin et al., 2016). The results of this study differed from previous research by the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum (2013) which indicated that international students were less willing to start in low-level positions than domestic students; whereas, in the current study, the participants were willing to enter into positions of underemployment in order to gain work experience. Overall, these findings are



consistent with previous research that indicated that international students' career choices are the result of complex influences (Lee, McMahon, & Watson, 2018).

In looking more closely at the role of influences on their career choices, the findings seem to align with STF (McMahon & Patton, 2019). In terms of process influences, the participants indicated that their career decisions were not static, but continuous across time in response to their shifting needs or context. In terms of internal influences, the participants shared, for example, that experiences in certain subjects challenged their ideas about the particular career paths they thought they would be interested in. Participants also noted that social influences, like their family, guided some of the directions they pursued or considered. For societal and structural influences, participants indicated having to shift the career goals they were pursuing as financial needs or obligations for immigration demanded their immediate attention. Finally, chance exposure to previously unconsidered or unknown areas influenced not only the major they pursued, but also whether or not some participants decided to stay in Canada post-study. Taken together, participants in this study described a career process that was ongoing, with shifting and iterative influences across individual, social, and structural spheres, all of which provides support for a STF conceptualization of career development (McMahon & Patton, 2019).

### **Implications for Practice**

For career practitioners, there are three main implications from the current study findings. First, many of the international students in the current study came to Canada and entered university with assumptions about what their career would be like. In career counselling, practitioners could adopt a stance of not-knowing in their work with international students and, using STF, map out the systems of influence guiding these assumptions (Patton & McMahon, 2014). In doing so, international students may come to recognize career choices from the past that they made when certain influences (e.g., family insights) were salient, that are perhaps less salient now. This exploration could help international students to respectfully let go of career choices that are no longer serving them, and openly engage in exploration for new directions. Importantly, career practitioners may want to emphasize that past career choices, even if not currently relevant, are not wasted time, but part of the exploration-exposure process to narrow in on a direction that is a better fit for them at this time.

Second, for some international students in the current study, their understanding of the role of work experience in their career development came after they had experienced the university-to-work transition. As such, when working with international students, it may be helpful to explore their understanding of the workforce, particularly employers' expectations of work experience (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Through these discussions, practitioners could help international students find ways to supplement their academic record with work experience while in study. For example, exploring organizations where they could volunteer, or how to go about getting a cooperative education or internship experience.

Third, some participants in this study who did not have supports (e.g., partner) had to prioritize their basic needs over advancing their career. Career practitioners need to be aware of, and sensitive to, these needs to ensure that they are meeting the student where they are at, versus where the practitioners think they should be (Flores, 2014). For example, encouraging the international student to spend their time volunteering when they are struggling to maintain tuition for the next semester would be out of step with their needs. Instead, career practitioners

could work with the international student to find innovative ways of first ensuring that they are meeting their basic needs, and then advancing long-term career goals.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

In making sense of the findings of this study, it is important to highlight some limitations and ideas for future research to address them. First, the findings represent the experiences of former international students who studied and then worked in Canada. As each country has different immigration and work permit specifications, these findings are not intended to be generalizable to other contexts. Instead, the experiences presented in this article offer ideas about the university-to-work transition experiences that could be transferable to framing and supporting others' career development experiences. Future research could further this exploration by investigating former international students' experiences in different country contexts to better understand the systems of influences that are relevant for international students' career transitions.

Second, although the participants in this study had made the transition from university-to-work, most of them were still early in their careers. As such, this study does not offer insights about the experiences of established, later career professionals. Future research could help to address this gap by following up with participants through longitudinal studies using IPA. This longitudinal perspective would provide further insights into how former international students' perceptions of their university-to-work transition change across time (McCoy, 2017); an important influence, as indicated in the STF (McMahon & Patton, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

The current study investigated former international students' university-to-work transitions. There were two superordinate themes that participants identified as being meaningful to their experience. First, throughout their degree and transition into the workforce, they engaged in career choices that they based upon their exploration and exposure with different career ideas. Through this process, they continuously refined their career path by ruling certain options out. Second, work experience played an important role during study as well as post-study in securing relevant employment. Work experience sometimes shifted in priority from career development to ensuring that they were able to meet their more basic needs. For career practitioners, these findings provide insights into considerations for conceptualizing international students' career development, as well as for providing interventions that appropriately and effectively address their needs.

As universities as well as governments of countries with highly developed economies continue to prioritize the recruitment of international students to meet demographic and economic aims (OECD, 2018), the need for effective career development practice will grow (Smith et al., 2016). As the international student population is diverse, often with complex contextual influences, it will be essential for career development practitioners to understand the unique career development needs of international students (Arthur, 2016). Future research can inform the utility of career development theories and their application in practice, with the aim of appropriately addressing international students' transitions. Career practitioners have important roles to play to ensure that international students are receiving the support they need to be successful in meeting their career goals in the pivotal university-to-work transition (Loo et al., 2017), thus creating meaningful experiences for them, and helping to integrate them into the workforce.

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**Summary**

In Chapter 4, I presented the main themes from both within and across participant interviews. Specifically, there were two manuscripts, the first of which highlighted the former international students' perceptions of their transition into and out of higher education. This manuscript focused on the long-term, broader transition experiences of former international students and provided implications for higher education institutions in the context of internationalization policy. The second manuscript described former international students' perceptions of their university-to-work transition. The focus of this manuscript was on highlighting insights needed for understanding international students' career development, and linking those highlights to implications for career practitioners. In Chapter 5, I describe implications for research, as well as strengths, limitations, and delimitations of the thesis, and conclude with ideas for future research.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

As a scientist-practitioner, I believe in the importance of the reciprocal process of research informing practice, and then practice informing research (Rowe, 2018). As noted in Chapter 1, my practical experiences (i.e., teaching and counselling work with international students) informed the research questions for this dissertation. In Chapter 4, I translated the knowledge I constructed from the participants' experiences into ideas to inform policy and institutional support, as well as theoretical considerations for career development practitioners who work with international students. Specifically, the discussion focused on ideas about how universities can shape messaging of the student experience to international students to help mitigate assumptions and expectations. Some recommendations included for university staff to be more familiar with immigration policies and requirements to appropriately advise international students, and to offer a broader scope of student support services. I also noted ideas for the career development field including working with international students to identify and explore assumptions about their chosen career paths, psychoeducation around workforce norms and demands, and sensitivity toward international students shifting needs (e.g., prioritizing attention to basic needs, or immigration demands).

In writing Chapter 5, I thought that there remained a key area to address in terms of the implications for research, and that addressing this area was necessary to complete the feedback loop between practice and research. As such, Chapter 5 includes a final manuscript reviewing some of the key considerations I encountered when conducting research with former international students. I then describe some strengths, limitations, and delimitations for this dissertation study, before offering some ideas for future research in this area. I end Chapter 5 with a conclusion to briefly summarize the main points of this dissertation.

**Manuscript 7**

As I analyzed the transcripts and constructed themes from participants' experiences, I noticed that I returned repeatedly to this feeling of being struck by their eagerness to share their perspectives, and, critically, how many felt unheard, or that their perspective was not sought after. From delving into the literature regarding the long-term perspectives of former international students and their transition from university to work, I had an intellectual understanding that this was not a well-developed area of research (e.g., Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). After hearing about, and interpreting meaning from participants' experiences that they shared with me, I gained an appreciation of what it is like to live through this transition with limited support. These reflections reinforced my understanding from counselling that a lack of appropriate information about a population and their experiences can create real hardship in their lives as their needs go unmet, as well as obscure their innovation and resilience in overcoming these hardships (Lingiardi, Nardelli, & Tripodi, 2015).

These reflections also renewed my aspiration from before I started graduate school to help provide a platform for international students' voices in order to learn more about their experiences. In moving forward with this aspiration, and having now completed research with former international students, I can better appreciate some of the challenges that researchers may encounter. As such, I created a final sole-authored manuscript to raise three key considerations for conducting appropriate research with former international students. Through sharing these considerations, I hope to address some of the challenges that could deter researchers from engaging in research with former international students.

**Statement of contribution.** I independently created and wrote the original work in this manuscript with the support of my primary supervisor, Dr. Nancy Arthur.

## Considerations for Conducting Research with Former International Students

### Jon Woodend

The experience of being an international student, once a temporary and rare occurrence, has become common as universities in many countries with highly developed economies continue to recruit greater numbers of international students (OECD, 2018). In the past, the expectation was that international students would assimilate into the existing destination country system and then return home, with few specific resources to support their transition (Akanwa, 2015; Taylor & Ali, 2017). As the international student population increased, administrators, faculty, and practitioners recognized the need to support international students in order to help ensure their success (Forbes-Mewett, & Nyland, 2013). Due to this recognition, the majority of research into the international student experience focused on their initial transition into the destination country, mainly their academic adjustment (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Although there is research to suggest that international students find some existing supports helpful (Roberts, & Dunworth, 2012), there remains a disconnection between their needs and available institutional support offered (Arthur, 2017).

One area in particular that is understudied is the post-study experience of former international students. That is, international students typically seek a foreign education as part of a long-term career goal to enhance their future employment prospects (Nilsson, & Ripmeester, 2016). Although employers agree that a degree from a university in a westernized country is valuable, many international students face challenges post-study that depreciate the worth of their foreign education experience, such as un/under-employment (Loo, Luo, & Ye, 2017). Given international students' cost of investment in a foreign education (Nilsson, & Ripmeester, 2016), and the deleterious effects of un/under-employment (Heyes, Tomlinson, & Whitworth, 2017), further research is needed to understand this post-study experience to appropriately support international students in preparation for and through their post-study transition. As such, in the current article, I provide key considerations for conducting appropriate and effective investigations into the post-study experiences of former international students, grounded in reflections of research experience with this population. Specifically, I offer three main considerations including conceptual understandings, logistical planning, and relational engagement in research with former international students.

### **Conceptual Consideration**

Before conducting research with former international students, there are some conceptual considerations that could help shape an appropriate study. One such consideration is that there is often an expectation in research methodologies that the sample or participants included will have targeted characteristics in order to create homogeneity (Creswell, 2013; Marshall, & Rossman, 2016). The goal of homogeneity is to learn about specific experiences and perspectives in order to have findings that offer generalizable implications to the wider population. For former international students, seeking homogeneity may result in stereotyping, and inappropriate and ineffective implications. Specifically, international students are highly diverse, representing people from various countries and intersecting cultures; an inherently heterogeneous population (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, there is often an expectation of linear pathways (i.e., that international students will either return to their country of origin or stay in the destination country; Arthur & Nunes, 2014). In reality, former international students may seek post-study opportunities across a variety of contexts (e.g., starting in the destination country before



returning to the country of origin, or pursuing other international education or employment experiences; Arthur & Nunes, 2014).

As such, separating perspectives based on participant characteristics may create fractured and disembodied understandings of the post-study experience, with limited generalizability to the wider population, or obscure critical implications useful across this population. This was a challenge that I encountered in research with former international students. Namely, seeking homogeneity in my sample required increasingly specific characteristics that excluded a large portion of the former international student population. As well, I was regularly surprised by the complexity of participants' post-study pathways, which required returning to my conceptualization of what the study was aiming to understand. For example, when focusing on the post-study experience, some participants had multiple post-study experiences, such as working after an undergraduate degree before completing a graduate degree and then returning to the workforce.

**Suggestions for research practice.** In moving forward with this conceptual consideration, I incorporated specific approaches from my counselling practice that were helpful. One approach was adopting a post-modern perspective where I challenged my assumptions about former international students' experiences. Although I have experience and expertise in working with international students, understandings of one experience does not necessarily translate to another. Checking with individuals if they share in these common experiences creates room for novel discovery. Anderson (2012) described this approach as a not-knowing position, used to invoke curiosity in the seemingly mundane. Minuchin, Reiter, and Borda (2014) referred to it as being flexible to alternative understandings of individuals' experiences that depart from one's expert hypothesis. Moules, McCaffrey, Field, and Laing (2015) likened this approach to being open to whatever new information may come from interactions with participants. To help achieve this openness, I used a qualitative approach (e.g., Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Smith et al., 2009) that allowed me to ask open-ended questions about my participants' experiences, including questions that might be assumed (e.g., that the participants completed high school in their country of origin). Through this process, I was able to appreciate assumptions and expectations that I held about the post-study experience. As well, this not-knowing stance invited complexity to the findings and helped to provide a detailed representation of the participants' experiences (e.g., learning that the participant graduated and worked in the country of origin before returning to the destination country to work). In this way, I embraced the diversity of participants' accounts, which were influenced from both home and destination country contexts. As a result of the complexity of the findings, I moved away from the goal of generalizability, as the experiences were highly specific to the participants, and instead focused on presenting the experiences as they happened to allow for transferability to other contexts. Transferability is where researchers demonstrate how findings could be applicable to different situations and populations through rich descriptions of what occurred for the current participants (Marshall, & Rossman, 2016). These rich descriptions may better represent the heterogeneous international student population in an embodied and comprehensive way, rather than generalizations to statistical averages or forcing categorization and commonalities.

### **Logistical Consideration**

In terms of practical considerations when conducting research with former international students, it is critical to note that, logistically, students who have graduated are harder to reach

and motivate to engage in research than are those who are currently enrolled in academic programs (Lawson, Kleinholz, & Bodle, 2011). This is one challenge that I encountered when trying to recruit former international students to participate in a study about their post-study experiences. What I found was that, based on previous studies with international students, while in study, students are easily accessible through email listservs, posters on campus, word-of-mouth, and credit-for-participation schemes (e.g., in Psychology courses). Moreover, the incentives for participation (e.g., small denomination gift cards) are typically enticing to students who often do not have a high paying, full-time job.

Once graduated, however, students' affiliation with their universities tends to diminish as they become involved in their post-study life (Lawson et al., 2011). There are multiple demands on their time, including strengthening their affiliation with employers and shifting family roles. Reaching international students can be even more complex in that the former students may seek post-study lives away from the local context (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Specifically, the majority of international students return to their country of origin, some search for opportunities elsewhere in the destination country, or pursue different international experiences (e.g., outside of the destination country or their country of origin). International students, particularly those that have lower competence or confidence in their English language abilities, may prefer in-person communication over telephone/video conferencing (Ammigan, & Laws, 2018). Limited ability to attend an in-person study could be a barrier to their participation post-study. As well, the incentives for participating in research that are considered appropriate by many ethics committees are a token gesture of minimal financial value and may not be enticing when the former student is in full-time work (i.e., value for time).

**Suggestion for research practice.** I approached this logistical challenge in a couple of different ways. One way was forming working relationships with alumni services, international student services, and career services at my university of affiliation, all of which tend to have some ongoing connection with former international students, post-study. For instance, alumni services often contact graduates about opportunities to continue to be involved with the campus community (e.g., mentorship, donations). Extending beyond campus resources, connecting with local immigration resources can also help as some recent immigrants may be former international students. I found that some of these on-campus and off-campus agencies may have hesitations about assisting in research outside of their department/organization, particularly about using their email listservs. As such, forming a strong relationship with these services earlier is critical to negotiating assistance, as they are the gatekeepers to accessing international student participants. Researchers also need to consider the value to service providers and strengthen mutual interests in assisting with participant recruitment. For example, researchers need to be mindful about establishing the benefit of the study to the service providers, and offer to contribute resources back to the research site (e.g., by providing an executive report of the findings to inform service provision, presenting at a staff meeting, developing a research-informed resource for use with international students).

When available, request personal, rather than school-assigned emails, as some former students may discontinue use of their school assigned email account post-study. Another way I approached this challenge was offering an incentive that would appropriately compensate for an hour of time for someone with a degree (e.g., if minimum wage is \$15/hour, then offering \$25 for a one hour long interview). Along with compensation, I offered a variety of ways in which former international students could participate (e.g., in-person, telephone, video conference),

along with flexible interview times, to help with any barriers due to location, timing, comfort, or preference. I also provided the research questions for potential participants to review before the interview in order to help mitigate concerns with English language ability.

### **Relational Considerations**

A final key point in conducting effective research with former international students is relational considerations. Although demographics in higher education faculty are shifting to be more diverse, researchers are still more typically white and male, and do not match the diversity found in the international student population (Rodriguez, 2015). As such, there may be a difference in power and privilege based on social position that could affect the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Tilley, 2016). For example, I present as white and male, part of the dominant population in Canada. In my interviews with former international students, I noticed that participants were perceiving me as Canadian, although I had not stated that I was. Based on my perceived identity, participants seemed hesitant to share negative experiences with Canadians in the workforce. Participants indicated that they “hated to say” or suggest problems with Canadian society. When participants did share their negative experiences (e.g., discrimination), they typically apologized for seeming “ungrateful”. They would often quickly follow up a criticism with an aspect of Canada that they appreciated. This dynamic may also be reflective of the marginal status of international students who may feel that they cannot risk disclosure that may be a perceived risk to their immigration and/or employment status.

Stein and de Andreotti (2016) noted that historical colonialism and current global power structures have perpetuated the ideology of western superiority and benevolence in sharing access to western education to students from countries with developing economies. As a result, former international students, in relation to a researcher who represents the dominant population, may feel as if there are appropriate and inappropriate topics to discuss. This raises concerns about what former international students are sharing in research settings and whether some aspects of social desirability influence the types of experiences shared. In turn, the depth and breadth of international student accounts influence how researchers are interpreting these findings, and how policy-makers, organizations, and practitioners are using these findings to inform policy and service provision.

**Suggestions for research practice.** In addressing these relational considerations, continued diversification of higher education researchers may help by creating representation and new norms about appropriate discussion topics; however, there are also steps researchers from the dominant population can make. It was important for me to first recognize and reflect on my social position, and, importantly, how participants are perceiving it. Positionality is emphasized in qualitative research, in order for researchers to reflect on how their identities and experience influence aspects of the research process and outcomes (Bourke, 2014).

Attending to awareness of my social position allowed me to change the way in which I engaged with subsequent participants. Specifically, I drew upon my clinical training as a counsellor to communicate in ways to provide a safe and collaborative research relationship, characterized as empathetic, genuine, and unconditionally supportive (Corey, 2016). For instance, I provided several opportunities during each interview to check with participants about their comfort in sharing, and I clarified what information would and would not be included in public reports. Moreover, I created space to discuss difficult situations along with successes (e.g., normalizing that students have a range of experiences in their post-study transition, all of which is important to hear about), and if I noticed the participant was only noting positive experiences,

then I explicitly invited stories about challenges. I also acknowledged the hardship in challenging experiences when participants did share them in order to further validate their importance to participants' journeys. At the end of each interview, I debriefed the participants' experiences and asked them if they had any concerns about the content that was discussed. In these ways, consent for participation extended beyond the initial conversation and signing of the consent form, to considering consent as a process that extends throughout the interviews with participants. This is a particularly important point for international students who may not be familiar with research and who also may be unsure about the authority of the researcher and how their information may be used. Finally, I contemplated the implications of my interpretations of the participants' experiences in creating the findings given my social position relative to theirs. For example, I created this article to highlight key considerations for researchers to engage appropriately with former international students.

### Conclusion

In this article, I presented three considerations for conducting appropriate and effective research with former international students. First, I described a conceptual consideration regarding framing the study aims, scope, and implications to represent the highly diverse international student population. Second, I noted a logistical consideration in terms of effectively reaching former international students in order to recruit them as participants for studies. Finally, I shared relational considerations that focused on how the interaction and perceived characteristics of the researcher may influence the content shared by former international students, particularly in regard to criticism of the destination country.

Although there can be challenges in appropriately and effectively conducting research with former international students, as this population continues to increase, the need for evidence-informed policy and supports will also grow (Scott, Safdar, Desai Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015). As such, researchers need to be innovative in the formation, recruitment, and implementation of studies to learn more about former international students' experiences. This research will help the bridge the gap in knowledge and effectuate important change in service provision for former international students, beyond their initial adjustment.

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## **Considerations for the Current Study**

For the sake of transparency and enhancing understanding of this dissertation research, in this section I share critical strengths, limitations, and delimitations to contextualize the findings and their implications. I also provide suggestions for future research to help address the limitations and progress the exploration of former international students' experiences in the university-to-work transition.

**Strengths of the research.** There are six main points that represent the strengths of the research study. First, the current study provided insights into the experiences of former international students. This is a population whose experiences researchers have focused on less than current students, particularly regarding their long-term university-to-work transitions (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This is a critical period for former international students who choose to stay in Canada post-study as they must move from a student visa and secure a work permit, typically the post-graduate work permit. For the participants in this study, all were successful in obtaining this work permit and finding employment. As such, their experiences could offer insights for other international students seeking a similar journey post-study. Second, there were 11 participants included in this study, which Smith et al. (2009) considered a large sample size for IPA. This larger sample size allowed me to gain a broader sense of the participants' experiences than I would have with a smaller sample size. Moreover, as I was able to create two manuscripts for the findings, this study retained a depth in the analysis, which a researcher may have to sacrifice when working with a larger sample size (Smith et al., 2009). As a result, the study presented a balance between breadth and depth into the investigation of an underrepresented population and experience.

Third, the results of the current study provided insights for policy and program development. Previous research indicated that, although universities have implemented some students support services that international students find helpful (Arthur, 2017), there remain gaps in service that leave these students unsupported. This study helps to address some of these gaps and ways to continue working toward optimal service provision.

Fourth, the study also offered ideas for career development theory. As explored in Chapter 2, researchers have called for renewed focus on the appropriateness of established career development theories and taken-for-granted understandings due to shifts in the world of work, particularly around demographics. Based on a Systems Theory Framework, (McMahon & Patton, 2014), the current study provides further evidence of the importance of understanding contextual influences that shape career and work. This finding is particularly important for international students, who are a highly diverse group that has not historically been considered in theory construction.

Fifth, at the same time that the current study helped to address some of the gaps in the literature regarding former international students' transition from university to work, it also served to highlight further areas needing exploration. The identification of future areas for investigation is a critical part of the research feedback loop to create more nuanced understandings of the needs of former international students (Smith et al., 2009). This nuanced understanding helps to identify challenges that they may face, and ways to help address them.

Finally, although the participants in the current study reported challenges in their transition from university to work, they also noted instances where they persevered, or had critical supports that enable them to overcome barriers to their successful transition. As such, the findings of this study go beyond identifying challenges and focusing on deficits (Jones, 2017),



and offers ideas for how to address these challenges based on the resilience and innovation of the participants in this study.

**Limitations and delimitations.** In the manuscripts in Chapter 4, I included specific limitations and delimitations relevant to each manuscript. In summary, I noted that there were only 11 participants in this study, and that the findings were not intended to be generalizable to the international student population. Furthermore, all the participants were international students in Canada, which has specific immigration policies that may not represent the situations of international students in other countries. Another point is that the participants in this study were all successful in gaining employment in Canada post-study and may not represent the experiences of those who were unable to do so. Moreover, the participants were all early into their careers and their experiences, or understanding of their experiences may shift over time, as they move further into their careers.

In terms of the main limitations and delimitations not already covered in the manuscripts included in Chapter 4, there are two key considerations. First, the current study only had three out of 1111 participants who identified as male. Therefore, the findings may have limited representation of the experiences of former international students who identify as male, and may over-represent the experience of those who identify as female (Smith, 2011). Although there is likely to be overlap in their experiences, there may be differences to consider given societal and cultural positioning of men and women (Wolf, Williams, Darby, Herald, & Schultz, 2018). Second, the current study purposefully investigated individuals and their experiences in moving from university-to-work. The study did not consider the experiences of accompanying partners and families of the former international students in the career transition. Although most international students come to the destination country on their own, the career influences of

partners and families is important given that a number of international students find a partner and start a family while in study (Stoner, Aamlid, Hilliard, & Knox, 2019), and some graduate international students come to the destination country with a partner or family (Cui, Arthur, & Domene, 2017; Woodend, Lei, Nutter, Cairns, 2016). Given that the influence of family was an important finding in the current study, further understanding is needed from broader family context.

**Future research.** The manuscripts contained in Chapter 4 included tailored ideas for future research. In particular, future researchers could continue to explore the transition from university to the workforce beyond the experiences of the 11 participants in this study. Some key perspectives to consider would be former international students who were not able to move into the destination country's workforce, former international students in different country contexts, and the long-term experiences of former international students in later stages of career. These perspectives would help to broaden understandings about this transition and provide insights into how different situations intersect with these experiences.

To expand upon these ideas, researchers could seek to address the limitations of the current study by seeking more participants who identify as male. Gaining additional insights into the experiences of former international students who identify as male would help with understanding gender dynamics that are influential and potential overlap and divergence of experiences between those who identify as female (Wolf et al., 2018). Likewise, researchers could consider other aspects of identity (e.g., gender expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.), as well as the intersectionality of identities to understand how these identities might shape the university-to-work transition. This understanding would provide further nuance into the challenges that are arising for different groups within this population, and

how best to address these challenges (Smith et al., 2009). For the delimitations, future studies could use IPA to understand how partners or families make career decisions and, in particular, how they jointly navigate the transition from university-to-work. This investigation would help to further understand the former international students' systems influences, as per STF (Patton & McMahon, 2014), by expanding the focus to include partners' and families' systems of influence, and how they interact with each other.

### **Conclusion**

In the current dissertation, I sought to gain insight into former international students' meaning-making of their transition from university into the workforce. Specifically, I included seven manuscripts in the dissertation to address this focus. In Chapter 1, there was a research-in-brief published article that provided an overview of the topic, method, analysis, and preliminary findings from the data, which served as a call to action on this topic. In Chapter 2, there were two manuscripts, the first of which looked at the role of international students in internationalization policy with implications for student support services. The second manuscript re-examined the utility of career development theories with international students in order to inform appropriate theoretical conceptualization and counselling for this highly diverse population. In Chapter 3, there was one manuscript which explored the utility of the method I selected to conduct the study, IPA, to investigate the experiences of an international career transition. As well, Chapter 3 included a description of how I used IPA in the current study. Chapter 4 contained two manuscripts, both of which incorporated the main findings from the study. In the first manuscript, the focus was on former international students' perceptions of their transition into and out of university, highlighting the continuation of perceived demands and ways of managing international transitions. The second manuscript focused on former international students'

perceptions of their career choices and work experiences. Finally, Chapter 5 included a manuscript that highlighted considerations for researchers to appropriately and effectively engage in research with former international students. The content of Chapter 5 also included key strengths, limitations, delimitations, and future research ideas.

In the context of this dissertation, governments of countries with highly developed economies and higher education institutions have indicated their continued intention to recruit international students (OECD, 2018). For example, the Council of the European Union plans to increase the number of international students attending institutions within the member countries by 20% in 2020 over 2011 numbers (as cited in OECD, 2018). As the number of international students increases, there will be reciprocal growth in the need for effective and appropriate student supports, including career development (Arthur, 2016, 2017). The participants in the current study shared that they often did not feel that they had appropriate nor sufficient support to be successful in their transitions into and out of university. Participants noted that feeling unprepared and/or unsupported affected their educational experience and their quality of life (i.e., un- or under-employment). Despite these challenges, participants in the current study also noted important ways in which they overcame these challenges, including their own mindset and sources of support (e.g., partner, family). For universities and governments, there is a need to further investigate ways to support international students throughout their experiences. Beyond the personal implications for international students and their wellbeing (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016), further improving student supports will help to achieve recruitment targets and fulfill social and economic policy (CBIE, 2018).

As I conclude this dissertation, I return to what brought me to this point: curiosity and compassion about the experiences of the high school students that I supported in Japan before

they left for their international student experience. For me, this dissertation helped to answer the question of “what happened next?” to those students in the absence of being able to follow them through their journeys. Now, my curiosity and compassion has shifted to “then what?” for the participants in this study. Specifically, I am left wondering about the ongoing decision-making, the shifting individual and social influences, and the tumultuous political context in which their career development is all occurring. I may never get to know the next steps for these participants; however, I fully intend to continue to support international students however best I can, whether that is in counselling, teaching, or research roles.

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## Appendix A

## Article Release Request and Permission

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**Article Release Request**6 messages

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**Jon Woodend**

13 March 2018 at 01:45

Dear Canadian Journal of Career Development Editorial Team,

Thank you again for helping me to publish my recent article "International Students' University to Work Transition: Research-in-Brief".

As a doctoral student, I am currently completing my dissertation, which is manuscript-based (i.e., a series of manuscripts ready or submitted for publication).

I was wondering if it would be possible to get a release from CJCD to include the article, as is, as part of my dissertation, rather than the word document (pre-submission) version I currently have included.

Any consideration you could give to this request would be greatly appreciated and if you need any additional information to help with your decision, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you very much,  
Jon Woodend

--

MSc, Counselling Psychology  
Doctoral Candidate and SSHRC Scholar  
Editor, Emerging Perspectives Journal



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**Robert Shea**

13 March 2018 at 01:46

Yes absolutely> Good luck with your dissertation

Robert Shea

Founding Editor

CJCD

[Quoted text hidden]

*This email is governed by the Terms and Conditions found in our [Disclaimer](#).*

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## Appendix B

## Recruitment Poster



## UNIVERSITY TO WORK TRANSITION: FORMER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

**Research Study:**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to learn more about international students' long-term transition from university to work. This study will explore former international students' perspectives about making this transition, and what it has been like for them moving into the Canadian workforce. Insight into this transition might provide ideas about how best to help this workplace integration and who is best situated to help. If you were an international student who **graduated 2 or more years ago and are currently employed in Canada**, please consider participating in this study.

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

**What you will be asked to do:**

1 hour interview (skype/telephone or in-person)

**If you are interested in participating, please contact:**

Jon Woodend [REDACTED]

**Incentive:**

\$25 VISA/Amazon.ca Gift Card



## Appendix C

## Consent Form




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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Jon Woodend, Werklund School of Education, Educational Psychology; [REDACTED]

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Nancy Arthur, Werklund School of Education, Educational Psychology; [REDACTED]

**Title of Project:**

**International Students' Perceptions of their University-to-Work Transitions**

**Sponsor:**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is being conducted by Jon Woodend, a doctoral candidate in counselling psychology. **The purpose of this study is to learn more about international students' long-term transition from university to work. This study will explore international students' perspectives about making this transition, and what it has been like for them integrating into the Canadian workforce. Insight into this transition might provide ideas about how best to help this workplace integration and who is best situated to help.** The information gathered will be used in the doctoral thesis work of Jon Woodend.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

Participation in this study involves completing a short online demographic questionnaire as well as a telephone/skype or in-person interview. Both will take less than 1.5 hours to complete. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and this will be used as the data for the study. An example of the interview questions is **"In as much detail as possible, tell me about your experience as an international student"**. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer all of the questions and you can decline to answer any questions if you choose. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

**What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

The researchers will attempt to keep all participants anonymous in the presentation of the findings and you will not be asked to provide your name at any time in the interview. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, field of education, current employment position, field of employment, time at employment, time in Canada, and relationship status.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio taped:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to and quote me by a pseudonym:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

**Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There is potential that while answering questions in this study that you may feel a range of emotions, including

positive feels, such as pride, and negative feelings, such as discomfort. These feelings are normal and should be temporary. The results from this research will provide a better understanding of the university to work transitions of international students and will provide a platform for the international student perspective to be shared. You are eligible for one \$25 Visa/Mastercard or Amazon.ca gift card (your choice) at the end of the study.

#### What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Participation is completely voluntary and confidentiality will be maintained. You are free to stop participation at any time during the study. No one except the principal investigators will have access to the questionnaire and interviews. There are no real names on the data, only pseudonyms. Only group data will be used for the demographic information, which will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. When quotations are used, those specific participants will be asked if these quotations share any identifying information that the researchers may not be aware of. You will be invited to review your quotations by email after your interview has been analyzed. The data will be encrypted and kept in a password-protected computer where only authorized persons may access the data. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be deleted. If you withdraw from the study after data collection is complete, your data cannot be destroyed because data is stored without identifiers and cannot be linked to participants. After the study is complete, all research documents will be stored for five years in a locked filing cabinet. After five years, all documents will be destroyed. It is anticipated that the results will be included in conference presentations, published in a peer-reviewed journal, and may be used as part of students' dissertation or thesis work.

#### Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

**Participant's Name:** (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Name:** (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

**Researcher:** Jon Woodend, [REDACTED], Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary

**Supervisor:** Dr. Nancy Arthur, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, [REDACTED]

**If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact Research Ethics Administrators, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at [REDACTED]; email [REDACTED].**

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## Appendix D

### Interview Schedule

#### **Demographic Questionnaire**

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. How would you describe your ethnicity?
4. What is your country of origin?
5. How long have you been in Canada?
6. What is your highest level of education? (If graduate level, ask about undergraduate level as well)
7. What was/were your field/s of study?
8. When did you graduate?
9. Were you employed before moving to Canada?
10. How long have you been employed in Canada?
11. How long have you been employed at your current job?
12. What jobs did you have before this one? How long were you employed there?
13. What is your current relationship status?
14. Did your relationship status change from graduation to now? (if so, please describe)

## Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study today. To begin, I will ask some questions about your experience of moving from university to the workforce.

1. In as much detail as possible, tell me about your experience as an international student.
  - a. During your time as an international student, what were your employment goals/plans? (What were your thoughts about working in Canada or in your home country?)
  - b. Did your goals/plans change throughout your studies? (If so, how so?)
  - c. What and/or who do you think impacted/influenced these goals/plans?
  - d. Were there particular challenges/tensions that you faced that impacted/influenced these goals/plans? (Are you comfortable providing some examples?)
2. Overall, what has your experience moving from university to work been like?
3. In as much detail as possible, tell me about your experience looking for employment in Canada.
  - a. Did your employment goals/plans change during this job search experience?
  - b. What and/or who do you think impacted these goals/plans? (Without identifying any particular person by name). Why was this so impactful?
4. In as much detail as possible, tell me about your experience initially fitting in or integrating (or not) into the Canadian workplace.
  - a. Did your employment goals/plans change during this integration experience?
  - b. What and/or who do you think impacted these goals/plans? (Without identifying any particular person by name).
  - c. Why was this so impactful?

5. In as much detail as possible, tell me what your current experience is like in the Canadian workforce.
  - a. What are your current employment goals/plans?
  - b. Where do you think you will work in the future?
6. If they were employed in another country before becoming an international student:
  - a. How was your experience moving from university to work in your home country similar and/or different from your experience in Canada?
7. Are there any other experiences, thoughts, feelings, reflections that you would like to share regarding your experience of moving from university to the Canadian workforce?
8. Has talking about your university to work transition provided you any further insights?  
(If so, what are they?)
9. When you volunteered for the study and were coming here today, what kinds of things did you think I'd ask?