Emerging Scholars

International Graduate Students' Experiences in Using University Career Services:
A Case Study of a Southern Ontario University

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Abstract

This study explores how the university career center supports international graduate students' career development in the local labor market. The research examines the category of career services and international graduate students' experience using the services. I analyzed career centers' websites and interviewed seven international graduate students and two career center staff at a university in southern Ontario. The middle-range theoretical framework was used to discuss the relationships of findings between previous literature and my research. My results indicate that one-on-one career counselling was the most popular service used by international students. The center also had wide connections with on- and off-campus stakeholders. The career center services can be accessed via email and the career center platform. International students received comprehensive and fundamental career support and positive feedback from career advisors. However, the services were not customized by discipline, especially for humanities and social sciences students. The research mainly aligned with previous studies on international students' experiences in using career services and contributes to the discussion of international student employability and student services.

Keywords: career development, career service, international student, middle-range theory

This study analyzes how a Canadian university's career center supports international graduate students in finding jobs in the local labor market. In 2022, the international student population at Canadian post-secondary educational

institutions grew by 200% compared with 2015, with 72.5% intending to apply for Post-Graduate Work Permits (PGWPs) (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2023; Government of Canada, 2023). Nonetheless, many newly-arrived international students struggle with language difficulties, cultural conflicts, and a lack of social connection in their career exploration (Avenido, 2023; Han et al., 2022; Sohrabi, 2023). Hence, university career centers are important to support international students in finding jobs in the local market after graduation. This research discusses what services are provided at the career center and international students' experiences using career services.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What support is available from the university's career center?
2. How do international graduate students access institutional career support?
3. What are the benefits of institutional career centers for international graduate students using their services?
4. What challenges do international graduate students experience in relation to institutional career services?

Literature Review

University career centers are vital in supporting international students' employment after graduation. Over the past century, career services evolved to include career counselling, job fairs, and workshops. Initially focused on assisting new immigrants' employment, the services are now expected to connect the students with the local communities and labor market (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Career centers are crucial in developing international students' career skills and knowledge for job applications (Helens-Hart, 2019; Holmes, 2013). Meanwhile, career centers work closely with student services and academic departments to provide more comprehensive support (Hayden & Ledwith, 2014; Jenei et al., 2020; Mills & Stefaniak, 2020; Schaub, 2012). Equally significant is the connection with employers and alumni, which helps develop international students' social networks (Helens-Hart, 2019).

Career services were expected to provide accessible and personalized support (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Domínguez et al., 2022; Hudson & Klein-Collins, 2018). However, prior research in the US and Canada suggested that international students found career services unhelpful for their career planning (Miller et al., 2016). Concerns occurred around the low quality and lack of specificity in counselling (Auter & Marken, 2016; Li et al., 2021). Miller et al. (2016) pointed out that career center staff may lack the intercultural and interpersonal training required to effectively support students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. British and Australian scholars highlighted those international students expressed dissatisfaction with the insufficient career support available to them and the limited connections with their studies (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Fakunle, 2021; Gribble et al., 2017). While some students encounter difficulties in utilizing career services due to language proficiency in English-speaking nations and regions, their counterparts in European mainland countries experienced equivalent or greater language barriers when navigating career services, career development, and understanding the unique workplace culture different from the English-speaking countries (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Gribble et al., 2017; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Zeltner, 2018).

This study seeks to fill out the research gap created by the limited focus on international graduate students' experiences in using career services in the Canadian context. Through analyzing international students' feedback on the benefits and limitations of career support, this research extends the previous literature findings on career services and provides practical insights for the university career centers to understand international students' career preparation needs better and design more accessible services.

Theoretical Framework

I employed Merton's (1968) middle-range theoretical framework, a tool often used in nursing, psychology, and education inquiries to furnish insights into real-world problems. The framework focuses on a narrower scope than grand theories and provides a more manageable approach to address specific research topics (Merton, 1968; Pawson, 2008; Risjord, 2011). This study diverges from research using concepts from the overarching career development theories like

Social Cognitive Career Theories (Bozionelos et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2021). Instead, the framework of this study was developed from previous literature related to international students' experiences in using university career services.

The framework is structured into two parts, closely aligned with the research questions. The first part examined the internal and external stakeholders of career services. Internally, I investigated detailed services provided by the university career center for international students and the collaboration between career services, on-campus student services, and faculties for international students' career development. Externally, I explored the partnerships between the career center, alumni, and employers. The second part of the study focused on international students' experiences with career services. One key aspect was accessing and utilizing career-related services. Additionally, the study delved into the benefits and challenges experienced by students who used career services.

Research Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative methodology in a single case study to explore international students' experience using the career service at a southern-Ontario university (Creswell, 2013). I first conducted an analysis of the provided career services on two career centers' websites. These centers were chosen due to their university-organized nature and their provision of services for students from all departments. Afterwards, I finished $n = 9$ semi-structured interviews with $n = 2$ senior staff from institutional career centers and with $n = 7$ international graduate students from various fields. I recruited student participants based on the criteria that participants must study in a postgraduate-level program at the targeted university or graduate within one year. Students also needed to confirm they had experience in using services provided by the university career center. I adopted a purposive sampling method and selected $n = 2$ career center staff with more than three years of full-time working experience in the career center and rich knowledge of the provision of career services. In the stage of data analysis, I first drew themes from the previous literature discussing international students' utilization of university career services and developed a list of predetermined codes, which corresponds to each research question (Thomas, 2003; Saldaña, 2011). Once interview transcriptions were cleaned, I explored common themes mentioned by students, career centre websites, and staff, and created sub-category codes. The coding and analysis were conducted on text segments to the appropriate codes on NVivo.

Findings

Theme 1: Types of Career Services Used by Participants

In my research, the most popular career services were career advising appointments of job applications and job fairs. Experiential learning projects like job shadowing programs helped international students learn more about the company. Career centers worked closely with internal and external stakeholders to support international students' career development.

Theme 2: Participants' Approach to Accessing Career Services

International students accessed career services through email and newsletters, which would direct students to an integrated website for registering for career-related events. While career centers used social media to post events, international students did not mention accessing the services in this approach.

Theme 3: Benefits of Using Career Services

One of the benefits was that institutional career support helped newcomers understand the workplace culture. Career workshops were informative in building students' connections with alumni and employers. Career services were helpful for graduate students in programs without strong career support. Highly professional programs like law, business, and STEM had a long history of developing their career support. Students in these programs tended to utilize career services within their faculties more frequently, expressing "less utilization of the career counselling and events provided by the university career center" (Student Participant 4). However, other professional and academic-oriented programs

offered limited career support for master's students. These students regarded the university career center as "a vital resource for their career development" (Student Participant 6). An additional benefit is that career advisors' guidance increased students' self-confidence in career preparation. The Career Center Participant 1 stated that "guiding, mentoring, and recognizing students' work would support students in achieving success in receiving job offers".

Theme 4: Challenges in Using University Career Services

Students expressed concerns regarding the availability of career advising appointments. Considering the massive demand for career advising and relatively small numbers of career center staff, students had difficulty booking appointments, especially during peak semester times. Another concern was the quality and specificity of career counselling. Five out of seven students reflected that the 20-minute one-on-one appointment was too short for advisors to provide in-depth and constructive feedback on students' application materials. In addition, career advisors lacked the capacity to offer tailored career guidance pertinent to their academic disciplines. One participant noted, "My career advisor was not familiar with my field" (Student Participant 4). Furthermore, the distribution of career resources was skewed towards STEM and business programs, particularly at career fairs. While receiving some guidance on job application, participants in social science and humanities found themselves "lacking sufficient opportunities to network with potential employers in their fields" (Student Participants 2, 3, and 6).

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Discussion

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My research found alignment and conflicts between findings and previous literature. Dey & Cruzvergara (2014) proposed that career services were customized since the 2010s, but student participants in the case found them too general. Career counselling is popular nowadays, despite being the center's focus in the 1970s. The staff's responses align with previous literature on the connection between career centers, other student services, faculty departments, and external stakeholders (Hayden & Ledwith, 2014; Hoover et al., 2013; Jenei et al., 2020; Mills & Stefaniak, 2020; Schaub, 2012).

My research findings were aligned with previous research that the career center has developed an web-based platform for students to book career advising appointments, engage with career-related events, and apply for on- and off-campus jobs (Dalaklis et al., 2023). Another point supporting previous findings is that participants were able to access career support via online and in-person approaches (Fakunle, 2021; Usher & Kwong, 2014). Prior studies mentioned the helpfulness of social media in career counselling (Khalijian et al., 2023; Kisch, 2015; Osborn & LoFrisco, 2012; Venable, 2010). However, participants did not indicate social media as a way of accessing career resources in the interview.

The career service helped improve students' self-efficacy in their career skills and knowledge. The result aligns with previous literature on self-efficacy's impact on learning outcomes and career interests (Adachi, 2004; Song & Chon, 2012). Regarding the challenges, Miller et al. (2016) stated that many international students found career services useless due to unmet expectations. This point partially aligned with my research findings. Cultural differences might contribute to challenges faced in the Canadian labor market. However, field and familiarity with the North American workplace culture also played a significant role. In my research, participants with experience working in the U.S. and those in highly professional programs were not hesitant to use career support. Newcomers to the continent and social sciences and humanities students would first need to be aware of using the career service and explore how career services could support their career pathways. My research findings mainly aligned and extended, and slightly contradicted arguments in previous literature, firmly embracing the role of middle-range theory in exploring the relationship between empirical research outcomes and previous findings.

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Implications

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My research sheds light on the career center's centralized approach to supporting international students' career development. The center provided fundamental career skills and knowledge and worked closely with multiple

stakeholders to handle students' career-related concerns. The findings indicated the center's limited capacity to support job applications and imbalanced resources among programs.

The research contributes to the field of international students by bridging and extending previous discussions on international students' experiences in using career services (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Arthur, 2013; Fakunle, 2021; Gribble et al., 2017; Miller & Berkey, 2016). Within the realm of comparative and international higher education, this research serves to expand previous discussions on how universities can better support international students' career development (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Gribble et al., 2017). This paper also builds upon existing research on international student employability (Tang, 2022) and presents an opportunity for JCIHE readers to further understand international graduate students' gains and concerns related to university career services.

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