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Career Support for International Students at Canadian Universities

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This paper provides an overview of career support services offered to international students at Canadian universities. First, background on Canadian education policy as it relates to international students is introduced. Next, there is an examination of the findings from interviews with career support staff at three Canadian universities and a discussion of the results. Finally, suggestions for Japanese universities to improve their career support for international students are offered.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, Japanese companies, faced with increasing global competition, have been making changes to their recruitment practices. One change is that more Japanese companies are interested in hiring international students (Aoki, 2012). Traditionally, however, Japanese universities have not provided much support to international students in helping them find employment in Japan. Recently, there has been an awareness of the necessity to improve the quality of career support offered to these international students to make Japanese universities more attractive to international students.

Given the limited career support at Japanese universities, it was thought that examining universities abroad with existing career support services might provide some useful insights for Japanese universities. This paper focused on the career support services offered to international students at Canadian universities. The author chose to examine Canadian universities given his familiarity with and access to a number of Canadian universities. This paper is based on research interviews that were carried out at universities in Canada in 2010 and 2011.

First, some background will be given by examining Canadian education policy as it relates to international students. The research process will then be explained and a brief description of the universities that participated in this research study will be provided. This is followed by an examination of the key findings from the interviews along with a discussion of the results. Finally, suggestions for Japanese universities to improve their career support for international students are provided.

2 Background

Canada places great importance on learning and has developed a first-rate education system with high standards. The education system in Canada has both

publicly funded and private universities. Education is a provincial responsibility under the Canadian constitution, which means there are significant differences between the education systems of the different provinces. Fiscal accountability in universities has been an ongoing trend over the past few decades.

Canada has traditionally been a country of immigrants and has a policy of encouraging multicultural diversity. Canadian universities have been traditionally open towards inviting international students. Although, as in other countries tuition tends to be more expensive for international students than for local provincial students. One trend from the 1990s is that bringing international students has been seen as a business opportunity for universities in terms of increasing revenue.

The statistics on international students in Canada send a mixed message (Owram, 2010). On the one hand, there has been considerable growth in recent years. In 1992, international students accounted for about 4% of all students enrolled in Canadian universities. That share has been showing steady growth from the mid-1990s through to the mid-2000s. By 2008, the share of international students had doubled compared to 1992, reaching 8% of all university students in Canada. These changes are the result of an increase in the overall number of international students at Canadian universities from 36,822 in 1992 to 87,798 in 2008 (McMullen and Elias, 2011). The number of full-time international students at all post secondary institutions in Canada has increased from 97,300 in 1999 to over 178,000 in 2008 (Macleans, 2010).

Yet relative to some other countries such as Australia or England, Canadian numbers are still low (Owram, 2010). Australia, with about two-thirds Canada's population, has over 300,000 full-time international students. England maintains its longstanding role as a major exporter of advanced education. In spite of recent growth, therefore, Canada is still far from being a leader in the field.

One reason is the late entry into the field of active recruitment. Canadian universities concerted attention on the international education market extends back to the early 1990s. In the last 15 years, though, Canadian universities have started to more actively recruit international students. They now use various strategies in an attempt to entice qualified students from around the world.

Another challenge is that most international students only consider a few main areas in Canada. The majority of international students settle in large cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. With respect to the Canadian region of destination, British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario account for almost 80% of international students. Quebec's share of international students was 26.1% in 2008. Ontario universities accounted for 33.8% of international students and British Columbia saw its share of international students rise to 19.0% in 2008.

Other reasons why international students may choose to study elsewhere include the related costs of studying and the weather in Canada. Since most provinces deregulated tuition fees, post-secondary institutions in some cases can charge international students more than three times the fees of Canadian students. Various surveys of international students have indicated that one main reason for not choosing to study in Canada relates to concerns about cold weather (Davidson, 2012).

Furthermore, the Canadian government has traditionally not made attracting

high quality university students from abroad a priority (Blanchfield, 2012). However, there has been more discussion recently pointing out the need to attract more international students to keep Canada's economy growing (Baluja, 2012). It is now generally accepted that the recruitment of international students is becoming more crucial for the education systems and job markets of the countries receiving these students (Mason, 2012). A recent government report suggests that Canada should double the number of international students by 2022 (Advisory Panel, 2012). The report makes a connection between attracting international students and filling labor market shortages.

3 Research Overview

This paper is a summary of research gathering trips to three universities located in Toronto, Canada to examine their activities to support international students with their careers. The visits took place in 2010 and 2011. The three universities visited were the University of Toronto, York University, and Ryerson University.

Staff and faculty at each of these universities who are involved with career support for international students were interviewed. The interviews were based on a series of predetermined questions. Questions related to specific services offered to international students such as language support, visa support, and job hunting support as well as difficulties encountered by international students in their job hunting. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour.

The three Canadian universities that participated in this survey are all in the city of Toronto. One key factor with regard to the city of Toronto is demographics. Toronto is a large multicultural city of over 4 million and is the arrival point for many immigrants. The Canadian government accepts around 300,000 immigrants per year and a large percentage of those immigrants locate in the Toronto area.

Thus the population is increasing and the children of immigrants provide a steady source of applicants to these universities. There is not a shortage of students or potential applicants interested in going to these universities. Given the fact that Toronto has only has three universities there is a shortage of universities in this large city. This means that the necessity to bring in international students has not been that strong at these universities in Toronto.

The following is a brief outline of the three universities that participated in the research study:

I University of Toronto

The University of Toronto was founded in 1827. It is one of Canada's most famous and prestigious universities. The Times Higher Education World University Rankings of 2012 ranks the University of Toronto at 21st place globally. It is also the biggest university in Canada with over 80,000 students (UofT, 2012). The University of Toronto has traditionally been a decentralized institution. It is located in downtown Toronto.

The University of Toronto has traditionally had a large number of international students particularly from Asia. The University of Toronto is highly re-

garded in Hong Kong and Taiwan and thus attracts many students from these regions. The number for first year students who are international students is 14% and the percentage of graduate students who are international students is 13%. The Center for International Experience is the organization that deals with international students and student exchange at the University of Toronto.

II York University

York University was founded in 1959. It was built in preparation for dealing with the population increase due to the large influx of immigrants in the 1960s. It is also a public research university. It is the third largest university in Canada with over 50,000 students (York, 2012). Many students come from the Toronto area, but there is a sizeable population of students from across Canada and abroad, making York one of the most international universities in Canada. It is located in the suburbs away from downtown Toronto.

York has 3200 international and exchange students from 130 countries. The number for first year students who are international students is 5% and the percentage of graduate students who are international students is 11%. York has exchange agreements with many Japanese universities including Keio, Waseda, Meiji, and Nagoya University. York International is the organization that deals with international students and student exchange at York.

III Ryerson University

Ryerson University was founded in 1948. It is located in downtown Toronto. It is more of a career-focused educational institution. It has over 30,000 students (Ryerson, 2012). Most of the students come from the Toronto area and many are the children of immigrants. The number of first year students who are international students is 3%. International Services for Students (ISS) is the organization that deals with international students and student exchange at Ryerson.

4 Interviews Results

Overview

The following is a summary from the interviews at these three universities. First, these universities have always taken in a fair number of international students. In recent times a large percentage of the international students are Chinese, Korean, and Indian. Many short-term international students often came to these universities to take part in intensive language courses.

In the past, however, these universities did not place a high priority on attracting international students. Most of the students who came were there because of their own initiative. Part of the reason for the lack of actively pursuing international students is due to the fact that Toronto is a very multicultural city. Thus many of the students who attended these universities were often children of immigrants themselves. This helped to naturally create a diverse student body.

In the last 10 to 15 years, these universities have taken a more active approach to recruiting international students. One way this is often done is by taking part in overseas study fairs. As well, these universities are designing materials

and university websites to be more attractive for international students.

Career support and services for international students also doesn't have a long history and is still evolving. In the past, international students were expected to use the same career support services that Canadian students would use for job hunting. Thus the career support centers at these universities often did not distinguish between international and Canadian students in terms of services provided. The career center staff also did not distinguish between different types of international students such as exchange students versus students who were registered as full-time students at the university.

In the last 10 years this has been changing. There is a greater awareness that international students may plan to work in Canada and have different needs with regards to their careers in Canada. Although career support for international students is increasing it is still evolving.

Services Provided

The types of services offered to international students vary. These include language services, visa support services, and job hunting services. These services may be offered by different parts of the university. For example, language services were not something offered by the career centers. Language services were offered at the language related faculties and often supported by the university's international student center. Secondly, these services were more focused on improving language for studies rather than career related language skills.

Recently the career centers have acknowledged that developing and providing language services related to job hunting is also something that needs to be done. One career center is developing a communications program with the school of continuing studies to offer language support related to job hunting. They are also planning to work together with the international student center to expand these types of programs in the future.

With regards to visa support services, this is not a service that was traditionally provided by the career centers. It was expected that if students were going to work in Canada after graduation they had to look into their visa options on their own. Post graduation visa issues were regarded as an individual matter and thus the career center did not provide much support.

With regard to job hunting and career services, in the past international students were expected to use the same services and programs that were provided to Canadian students. In recent years, it is been recognized that international students may require additional services to help deal with issues such as language and cultural differences as well as being unfamiliar with job hunting in Canada. Career centers are considering what to do and are planning and developing programs. The following are some of the services that are being provided to international students to help them with their careers.

One basic approach is to develop lectures or workshops for international students. In this case it might just be a few hours one afternoon related to a specific topic that would be useful for international students in their job hunting. This is often seen as a first step in developing a comprehensive program for international students.

One university developed a Canadian work experience program. This is an eight-week program that provides students with some in class training as well as work experience. It provides a lot of basic skills related to customer service and worker relations in Canada. It includes a section on business English as well as how to develop presentation skills. There were also workshops on job hunting and networking. The final part of program is getting some work experience by doing an internship.

Another university carried out a thirty-day pilot study aimed at helping international students find jobs in Canada. This pilot study offered classes on Canadian business etiquette. There were also job hunting related classes and workshops that aimed to help students with their resume writing and interviewing skills. Employers were also brought in to talk about the workplace. Unfortunately, this program was not continued due to various reasons.

One career center is looking at providing e-learning to support international students. They plan to create a series of ten-minute modules which students could find online and review on their own. Each module would focus on a different topic. These modules would include career related topics such as how to write a resume as well as how to find work in Canada.

Another career center is planning to set up a mentor program. This is where retired business people can help students with their job hunting. Students could consult with these mentors on a regular basis. It would be helpful in developing a network since most international students are lacking in connections to the Canadian business community.

The following career activities are available to all students and thus would be beneficial to international students as well. The most basic type of career development is self-directed support. In this case, students would be provided with the resources such as career development materials and online career services and would be encouraged to job hunt on their own.

There are also career planning assessments that students can use. These include a number of self-assessments that students can do to understand themselves better and help them with their career planning. They could then meet with a career counselor. Based on their results, there are also a number of training programs that are available to help develop necessary skills.

Challenges

The staff at these career centers noted a number of challenges with regards to providing career support to international students. First, the programs tend to be very labor-intensive. They often require one staff working with a small group. Also individual needs are different so they often may require one-to-one support. This requires a large budget and staff. In some universities, students are required to pay extra to get additional career support from the university.

Another challenge is that it is difficult to find internships for international students. Some companies are hesitant to offer internships to international students. In the past some international students refused or quit their internships which is why some employers no longer offer any internships to international students. A few career staff commented that many international students don't like to

volunteer or do unpaid internships.

Many Canadian companies prefer to hire students that have some work experience. However, many international students lack related work experience. In many Asian countries including Japan, students spend most of their time in high school and university focusing on their studies rather than working. In many of these countries not having work experience is not a problem. This is different in Canada and is one reason why companies will not hire international students even if they are outstanding students.

Employers are also often hesitant to hire international students because they are worried about potential visa problems. In some cases it can be very complicated and time consuming to get a visa issued when hiring an international student. One career center is also planning to create seminars for employers in order to educate them on the merits of hiring international students.

Another challenge for international students is that it can be a lot of pressure to find a job during their final year when they are busy writing their graduation thesis. In the past, students had to find a job within three months of graduating or they would be required to go home. Fortunately, the Canadian government is making it slightly easier for some international students to work in Canada (Huck, 2011). There have been some changes to the immigration laws that allow graduate level students to extend their stay after graduation or even be eligible to apply for permanent residency.

5 Conclusion

Clearly there are some major differences between the career support offered to international students at universities in Canada and Japan. The notion of universities helping international students find employment in Japan is fairly recent. It is believed that one way to attract more international students is by providing them with possible employment opportunities in Japan after they graduate. Thus universities that offer these career support services would seem to be have an advantage in attracting and increasing their number of international students.

Based on discussions with university staff, observations at the universities, and reviewing related materials, the following areas should be examined to help support international students at Japanese universities. The Japanese university career centers should make career support for international students more of a priority and thus allocate more resources for these activities. Japanese university career centers should develop workshops, lectures and programs that provide support for international students in their job hunts. As in Canada, this will require cooperation between different parts of the university including the career center, Japanese language departments and the international student center faculty and staff.

Relative to other developed countries, Japan has been less open to immigration. This perception of Japan still exists in many countries. By providing career support to international students this can help to change this perception and also make Japanese companies a more attractive option for international students. As well, more skilled international students in the workforce can aid Japanese compa-

nies in dealing with an aging workforce and potential future labor shortages.

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