INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: SELECTION OF STUDY DESTINATIONS, STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING POST-STUDY WORK PROGRAMS

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INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: SELECTION OF STUDY DESTINATIONS, STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING POST-STUDY WORK PROGRAMS (206 pp.)

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This qualitative research aimed to identify the factors influencing selected international graduate students to study in the United States or Canada and to explore their post-graduation employment experiences. The researcher compared the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program in the United States with Canada's Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP). The ultimate goal was to determine the similarities and differences in the students' rationales for choosing a study destination and in their experiences with post-graduation employment, considering the post-study work program available in each host country.

A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 11 international graduate students identified six key factors that influence the choice of a study destination: (1) academic considerations, (2) financial concerns, (3) social influences, (4) language and culture, (5) immigration and employment policies, and (6) students' perceptions of the host country. Regarding post-study employment experiences, the findings highlighted that U.S. graduates often find the OPT program challenging to navigate and face significant career uncertainty after

its completion. In contrast, graduates in Canada report a more favorable experience with the PGWPP, although securing employment remains a challenge in both countries.

Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull framework was employed to analyze the factors driving international graduate students to North America. This study deepens the understanding of international student mobility and highlights the challenges impacting graduates' ability to transition into the workforce in their host countries. The findings have significant implications for policymakers, higher education institutions, employers, and international students currently studying or planning to study in the United States or Canada.

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there were 5,127,010 internationally mobile students worldwide in 2016; by 2021, this number had grown to 6,440,413 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], n.d.b)

> Internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin. (UIS, n.d.a)

The growing number of internationally mobile students referred to as international students hereafter, indicates that studying abroad has become an increasingly common practice, especially as countries compete to attract more of these students. The United States and Canada are key players in this competition, collectively hosting over one and a half million international students in 2021. Data from the Institute of International Education [IIE] (2022) show that 914,095 international students were in the United States in 2021. Similarly, according to the Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE] (2022), Canada hosted 621,565 international students in the same year. The popularity of these destinations raises an interesting question: What makes the United States and Canada so appealing to international students?

Problem Statement

Current research on international students suggests a connection between studying abroad and the desire to integrate into the labor market of the host destinations. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) noted that “International students want to pursue a career in the host country, which is becoming harder and harder due to new documentation requirements and policy hurdles” (p.

571). Despite their willingness to work, the experiences of international students navigating post-study employment in the face of immigration and employment policies in the host nations remain underexplored. Tang et al. (2014, as cited in Tran et al., 2020) highlighted the lack of knowledge on "the decision-making process and experience[s] of international students transitioning from student to work and other visas in their host countries" (p. 4). These scholars also noted that researchers rarely investigate the experiences of international students who extend their stays in the host country after graduation and attempt to find employment (p. 4).

After graduation, international students engage in employment through post-study work programs (PSWPs). Trevena (2019) defined PSWPs as policy instruments and key migration policies designed by governments in prominent study destinations to attract and retain international students (p. 6). These programs, available in various countries, allow international students to transition to employment in their host countries. "Many receiving countries in the Global North facilitate education-to-work transitions of international students after graduation" (Riaño et al., 2018, p. 284). According to Trevena (2019), in Canada and the United States, two prominent destinations for international education, post-study employment is regulated by, respectively, the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) and the Optional Practical Training (OPT). The H-1B visa is another program that facilitates employment opportunities for former international students and skilled migrants in the United States. However, since working under the H-1B comes after the OPT experience and necessitates a sponsorship from an employer, this study focuses specifically on the OPT, the most common route for employment for international students holding an F-1 visa in the United States. The F-1 is a non-immigrant visa that allows nationals from other countries to enter the United States for academic purposes. International students under this visa can enroll in academic educational or language training

programs at institutions approved by the U.S. government (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2020).

From a policy standpoint, what post-graduation employment programs like the OPT in the United States and the PGWPP in Canada require is clear. However, international students' experiences with these programs and their implications for their employment prospects, careers, and lives in the host nations are often overlooked. Research on programs and policies guiding international students' employment post-graduation has typically focused on political and legal issues rather than individual experiences. Consequently, the problem this study addresses is the knowledge gap regarding international students' experiences navigating the PGWPP in Canada and the OPT in the United States. Understanding these experiences is important because, as policies designed to attract and retain international students (Trevena, 2019), PSWPs have significant implications for the lives and careers of the students (Riaño et al., 2018, p. 284). Understanding the policy requirements without knowing how the policies affect international students is a mistake no stakeholder within the field of international education can afford to make. In the context of global competition for talent, prominent destinations have much to gain from understanding international students' perspectives on PSWPs and the implications of such policies on the careers and lives of the students. Many researchers analyze PSWPs from the written policy of the host nations (Baas, 2019; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Tran et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020; Trevena, 2019). Prioritizing students' perspectives is imperative to inform decision-makers and stakeholders about the impact of policies on students. PSWPs, as migration policies, impact the academic mobility of students and their lived experiences. Focusing on the effects of the implemented policies has become "a promising avenue for future research (Riaño et al., 2018, p. 284).

The study also explores the drivers of student mobility to Canada and the United States. The research method involved selecting international graduate students to share their motivating factors for choosing a country of study and describe their experiences navigating the specific post-study work program available in their respective host destinations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this basic exploratory qualitative study was threefold. I conducted this research to:

a) Identify the factors guiding selected international graduate students to study in the United States and Canada.
b) Explore the selected students' perceptions of their experiences navigating employment through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) in Canada and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States. And,
c) Examine the similarities and differences in the selected students' rationales for choosing a study destination and their experiences navigating post-study employment in the host country.

I designed this study to identify the factors that attracted selected international graduate students to Canada and the United States and to explore their experiences navigating employment in these two prominent study destinations. Using a comparative approach, I analyzed the mobility drivers leading students to each country. I explored international graduate students' employment experiences, taking into account the requirements of the post-study work programs available in the United States and Canada. For the purpose of this research, I used the following definition adapted from Trevena (2019), who described post-study work programs as policy instruments and key migration policies designed by governments in prominent study destinations "to attract

and retain international students" (p. 6). She noted that the programs allow international students to extend their stay after graduation to "gain valuable (international) work experience" (p. 6) in the host country's labor market. In some countries, the additional time provided by the program "adds to the period to fulfill permanent residency requirements" (p. 18), making them a route for "high-skilled migration" (p. 6).

The target participants were international graduate students at the master's or Ph.D. level, working or applying to work under the PGWPP in Canada and the OPT in the United States. They were recruited from STEM-related disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and non-STEM-related areas of study. In the United States, specific majors are classified as STEM-related fields for the purpose of the OPT program (Homeland Security Investigation, 2024). Because the OPT allows students to apply for the program as early as 90 days before graduation, while the PGWPP requires students to complete their academic program prior to applying for the work permit, all participants in Canada had already finished their degrees, while some participants in the United States were approaching graduation and others had already completed their programs.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1) What factors influenced the selected international graduate students to study in Canada and the United States?
2) How do the selected international graduate students describe their experiences navigating post-study employment in Canada and the United States, considering the respective post-study work program requirements?

3) In what ways (if any) are the rationales for choosing a study destination and the experiences of selected international graduate students navigating post-study work programs in the two countries similar or different?

Significance of the Study

The growing evidence from the literature that the availability of post-study work programs (PSWPs) has turned into a driving factor in selecting study destinations has warranted the need to revisit the drivers of international student mobility and better understand the experiences of international students who navigate PSWPs. Tran et al. (2019) noted that "Post-study work rights (PSWRs) are becoming increasingly influential in international students' decision of study destinations" (p. 4). Therefore, what brings international students to Canada and the United States and how the students experience PSWPs in these two destinations seems a timely topic that needs further investigation. This study has both theoretical and practical significance. It fills the literature gap and serves as a starting point to inform the decision-making process of all the different stakeholders involved in international education today: international students, employers, host institutions, and policymakers in the host nations.

Theoretical Significance

In terms of theoretical importance, this study addresses the gap in scholarship regarding the perspectives of international students navigating PSWPs in Canada and the United States. It also exposes their rationales for coming to these two destinations in the first place. Much of the literature on international students and PSWPs comes from the perspective of the host countries based on those countries' needs and the reasons why they retain some graduates and not others. Very little is known about the students' experiences navigating the programs and what their experiences look like based on their perspectives. Many studies do not consider the students'

voices regarding policies that guide international students' post-graduation employment in their study destinations. Continuing this practice may result in PSWPs being regulated by policies that do not consider the students. Therefore, nations will continue to design such policies without insights from the people they affect most. By putting the voices of international students at the forefront regarding their experiences with PSWPs, this study fills the void that previous practices have created.

Practical Significance

This research benefits various stakeholders, including current and prospective international students, higher education institutions, national policymakers, and employers.

Students

The United States and Canada rank among the top destinations for international education. According to IIE (2022), there were 914,095 international students in the United States in 2021. Similarly, CBIE (2022) reported that Canada hosted 621,565 international students in the same year. The two neighboring countries offer high-quality tertiary education. Consequently, what happens to students in these nations post-graduation may determine where future informed students will go for their international education. Baas (2019) noted that "International students have become much more critical in their selection of study-abroad destinations and do not simply base their decision on the quality of education alone" (p. 227). Findings from this study may guide prospective and current students who consider rationales beyond educational quality when selecting their final destinations. By learning from the experiences of the participants in this study, other students can make more informed decisions before choosing a study destination.

Higher Education Institutions and National Policymakers

There is a growing competition to attract more students from the global pool of internationally mobile students. As stated before, in 2021, there were 6,440,413 internationally mobile students worldwide (UIS, n.d.b). Over 1.5 million of them went to the United States and Canada in 2021 (CBIE, 2022; IIE, 2022). A comparative study of the experiences of international students who come to Canada and the United States can inform policymakers in both countries. If it is determined that PSWPs attract international students and increase enrollment, this study can benefit higher education institutions in the two countries. The rationale is that if nations design attractive policies that bring international students and provide them with a positive experience regarding PSWPs, higher education institutions in these nations can increase the destination's attractiveness, consequently improving their international students' enrollment.

This study can also indicate to policymakers the actual mobility drivers of international students to Canada and the United States. By understanding what attracts international students to specific destinations, the quality of experience, and the challenges they face while navigating PSWPs, governments may rethink their policies to align them with the needs and interests of students, higher education institutions, and employers.

Employers

Unlike their domestic counterparts, whose degree completion is a ticket to join the workforce, for international students, degree completion does not automatically translate into eligibility to work in the host nation. The graduates who want to gain work experience in their study destinations must do so within the framework of PSWPs, mainly the OPT in the United States and the PGWPP in Canada. This means that employers must also understand the

requirements of the programs to hire international students. The need to secure the proper work authorization implies that graduates and employers may face challenges depending on the flexibility and lack thereof of the programs. Consequently, this study can benefit employers in Canada and the United States by providing a deeper understanding of PSWPs and how they impact international students and employers willing to hire them. If a need for policy change emerges from this study, employers can use it to lobby for changes that serve the interests of their organizations.

Positionality

Positionality, also known as reflexivity, allows qualitative researchers to continuously examine themselves and make salient how their identities and values influence a research project (Dowling, 2008, p. 747). Unlike quantitative research, in qualitative research, the inquirer is not only the main instrument of data collection but also engages in data analysis, interpretation, and reporting of findings. Positioning the researcher at the center of the decision-making process implies that their biases, beliefs, values, and assumptions may impact the research (Bourke, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe that qualitative research is not value-free. According to them:

> We should be prepared to admit that values do play a significant part in inquiry, to do our best in each case, to expose and replicate them (largely a matter of reflexivity), and finally to take them into account to whatever extent we can. (p.186)

Bourke (2014) also shared a similar belief. For Bourke, “In qualitative research, it is reasonable to expect that the researcher’s beliefs, political stance, and cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process” (p. 2).

To deal with potential subjectivity that may influence their study and reduce the impact of these variables on the research process, researchers need to acknowledge who they are in relation to the topic and the participants they want to investigate. They need to recognize and express their backgrounds as they approach the phenomenon under investigation. As Patton (1990) posited: "A qualitative report must include information about the researcher. What experience, training, and perspectives does the researcher bring to the field? What personal connections does the researcher have to people, program, or topic studied?" (p. 472).

For the reasons mentioned above, I am aware of the necessity to acknowledge my various backgrounds, values, beliefs, and connections to the phenomenon under investigation. On a personal level, I can share that I came to the United States to further my education and earn my graduate degree. Therefore, I identify as an international student in this country, coupled with my identity as a Black and African male. As a result, I have my own opinion on post-study work programs. If I intend to get a full-time job in the host nation post-graduation, I will have to do it through post-study work programs such as the OPT.

In a way, I live the same phenomenon that is the focus of this study. My shared identity with the participants provides one perspective on the experiences of international graduate students navigating employment regulated by post-study work programs. I also have a personal account of the rationales for coming to a specific country for graduate education.

Additionally, I have friends who are international students. Over the years, we have spent a considerable amount of time discussing career goals post-graduation. Many have shared their hope of finding employment in the host country. However, they have often expressed concerns about navigating immigration and employment policies that can limit their opportunities. This exposure to the topic is anecdotal and has no value unless researchers give international graduate

students a chance to share their experiences and perspectives via a well-designed and trustworthy study. I engaged in this study with the assumption that my shared identity with the participants would help them feel comfortable enough to share their perspectives and experiences at a deeper level. However, at the same time, I needed to be vigilant in listening to my participants' words. I did not assume that a shared identity leads to similar experiences because I believe that each experience is unique.

Along with my connection to the phenomenon under investigation, my training and experience as a doctoral candidate in higher education administration, focusing on international education, have exposed me to a wide body of scholarship on international students. The literature is rife with various challenges these students face during their educational journey. Through conversations with faculty members and other colleagues in the program, I have deepened my understanding of the experiences of international students regarding various challenges ranging from academic, social, financial, and, more importantly, what happens to them post-graduation. I have seen or heard stories depicting international students facing challenges when trying to secure employment. I have also heard about students choosing between starting a career in the host nation versus returning to their home countries. The personal and professional exposure to the topic instilled in me the curiosity to explore and understand why international students choose to earn their graduate degrees in Canada and the United States. I am also interested in finding out what their experiences look like once they graduate and start navigating employment through post-study work programs.

I am not afraid to research the experiences of other international students because I understand that my values, beliefs, and identity are not limitations if I am conscious of them. On the contrary, they can help me better frame and approach this research study. They have shaped

the research from the beginning (Bourke, 2014). However, as a constructivist researcher who acknowledges the existence of multiple realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I know that each international student may have a different story regarding the motivating factors that brought them to Canada and the United States. Constructivist researchers believe that meaning is not discovered; it is constructed (Crotty, 1998). The belief in the plurality of meanings derived from the constructivist perspective led Crotty to state that "Different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 9). Consequently, I expected that international graduate students would provide different descriptions of their experiences navigating post-study work programs in Canada and the United States. I expected each student's rationales for coming to their host country to be different, and I believed that each reality was valid and needed to be reported whether they matched any a-priori assumptions or not.

Researcher's Paradigm

A researcher's paradigm or theoretical perspective is important to mention and explain since it tells how someone sees and makes sense of the world (Crotty, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined a paradigm as "a worldview, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexities of the real world" (p. 15). For them: "Our actions in the world, including our actions as inquirers, cannot occur without reference to those paradigms" (p. 15). Additionally, they stated that "as we think, so do we act" (p. 15). According to them, inquirers view the world through the following paradigms: positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, critical/feminist, and poststructuralist. Creswell and Creswell (2018) used the term *worldviews* to refer to paradigms and added that they influence research practice in all its stages. They also noted that the four most prevalent worldviews found in the literature are post-positivism, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism.

Each worldview mentioned above affects how researchers conduct their inquiry and gather and interpret data. Positivists, for instance, believe there is an objective reality to discover. On the contrary, constructivists believe that realities are multiple, based on individual perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002). Costantino (2008) explained the fundamental ontological and epistemological differences between positivism and constructivism. She also acknowledged the existence of multiple realities. According to her:

> Ontological and epistemological views in the constructivism paradigm disallow the existence of an external objective reality independent of an individual from which the knowledge may be collected or gained. Instead, each individual constructs knowledge and his or her experience through social interaction. (p. 116)

As I engaged in this research, I needed to clarify how I viewed the world and the assumptions and beliefs shaping the approach used in this study. Like many qualitative researchers, I undertook this inquiry using a constructivist paradigm. Other scholars have also supported the connection between qualitative research and the constructivist paradigm. “Constructivism or social constructivism (often combined with interpretivism) is such a perspective, and it is typically seen as an approach to qualitative research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 54).

Given that an inquirer’s worldview affects research, it is necessary to explain constructivism and how espousing this worldview impacted how I conducted this inquiry. As claimed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), “Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 46). The assumption derived from such a paradigm is that “Multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). Constructivists, therefore, believe that knowledge is relative, context-dependent,

and should be co-constructed between the inquirer and the participants. Additionally, they think that gaining an understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants is the primary goal of the inquirer (Costantino, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since there is no single reality to discover, each participant has a point of view worth revealing. Merriam and Grenier (2019) asserted that "Exploring how individuals experience and interact with their social world and the meaning it has for them is based on an interpretive (or constructivist) perspective embedded in qualitative approach" (p. 4).

In line with this assertion, I wanted to explore and understand the experiences of selected international graduate students navigating post-study employment. My goal was to find the varied rationales that guided these international graduate students to choose Canada and the United States as host destinations. I engaged in the study with the assumption that students' rationales for selecting Canada and the United States as host nations, the reasons they left their home countries, the opportunities, and the potential challenges along the way were multiple and varied. Each story deserved my full attention. As a constructivist researcher engaged in co-constructing knowledge with my participants, I used interviews to gather their perspectives vis-à-vis the phenomenon. Hatch (2002) asserted that "Researchers and the participants in their studies are joined together in the process of co-construction" (p. 15).

It is also important to remember that context is essential in the process. My background as a researcher shaped the interpretation flowing from my personal cultural and historical experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since individual perspectives are essential in a constructivist paradigm, I thought it was high time researchers focused on international graduate students' perspectives regarding post-study work programs. By doing so, I intended to uncover the multiple realities of international graduate students and give them a chance to share the

meanings they give to their experiences selecting Canada and the United States for graduate school and navigating post-study work programs in the host countries.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the problem addressed in this dissertation and introduced the research purposes and questions. After making a case for the need to investigate post-study work programs from the perspectives of international graduate students and the need to revisit the drivers of students' mobility to Canada and the United States, I situated myself vis-a-vis the research topic and the people studied. After covering my positionality, I ended the chapter with my research paradigm and its influence on this study. The next chapter presents a literature review focusing on international student mobility, the framework informing this study, and an overview of post-study work programs in Canada and the United States.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides an overview of the mobility of international graduate students and their presence in the United States and Canada. Beyond mere statistics, the focus is on the factors explaining this growing mobility. These factors include globalization and its various consequences: the knowledge economy, the expansion of internationalization, and cross-border education. The review also covers the factors that influence international students' choices of host destinations and introduces the push-pull framework that explains international student mobility. The final section is devoted to an overview of post-study work programs available in the United States and Canada.

Overview of International Students

The world is witnessing an accrued movement of people across borders. There is also an increased mobility of students for the sake of higher education. International students from all parts of the world travel to multiple destinations to obtain tertiary-level degrees. To illustrate, 6,440,413 people studied abroad in 2021 (UIS, n.d.b). More and more nations are working to position themselves as attractive destinations for international education.

Since the post-World War era, the Institute of International Education has kept records of international students' presence in the United States. For as long as 1948/49, the United States has led the world in hosting international students. Since 2016, the United States has surpassed the cap of a million international students (IIE, 2022), making it the only country worldwide to boast of such a milestone. From 2016 to 2020, the United States hosted more than a million international students annually before witnessing a slight decrease in 2021, with a total enrollment of 914,095 international students (IIE, 2022).

In recent years, the Canadian government and its higher education institutions have tried to close the gap and establish Canada as a top destination for international education. Regarding international student recruitment, Canada is now a competitor of the United States. According to CBIE (2022), there were 621,565 international students in Canada in 2021. As a result, Canada is currently one of the top destinations, sometimes surpassing traditional destinations such as the United Kingdom (ICEF monitor, 2022).

International Students in the United States

In 2021, the United States had a total tertiary-level enrollment of 19,744,000 students, almost a million of whom were international students (IIE, 2022). IIE noted that despite a 15% decrease in international enrollment compared to the previous year, there were 914,095 international students in the United States, making up 4.6% of the total number of post-secondary students. The organization remarked that the United States was still the number one destination for international students in 2021.

Sending Countries

Most international students in the United States come from Asian countries. Together, China and India sent more than 50% of the total international students, with respectively 34.7% from China and 18.3% from India (IIE, 2022). IIE reported that the top ten sending countries of international students were China, India, South Korea, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico, and Nigeria. These ten countries sent more than 71% of international students to the United States, and Nigeria was the only African country in the top ten sending nations to the United States (IIE, 2022).

Levels of Study

Of the 914,095 international students enrolled, 329,272 were graduate students, and 203,885 were on OPT, the employment opportunity under the F-1 Visa (IIE, 2022). Graduate students and OPT students make up a large portion of the total international student population in the United States. Their significant number makes a study focusing on the motivations that brought them to this country and their employment experiences post-graduation even more relevant.

Fields of Study

Regarding the fields of study that generally attract international students to the United States, students were enrolled in various majors in 2020-2021. However, it is essential to note that STEM-related majors attracted more international students than non-STEM-related fields (IIE, 2022). The factors explaining international students' preference for STEM majors deserve scholarly attention. For instance, while there were 190,590 students in engineering and 182,106 in math and computer science, there were only 51,101 in fine and applied arts and 15,402 in education (IIE, 2022).

Places of Study

International students enroll in higher education institutions all around the United States. However, specific states and institutions have been more successful in attracting international students than others. The lion's share goes to California and New York, the only two states that hosted more than 100,000 students each in 2021. The state of Ohio came in the eighth position with 29,979 international students, and 6,865 of them enrolled at Ohio State University (IIE, 2022).

International Students in Canada

Canada has successfully established itself as a study destination over the last two decades. The country has experienced a significant increase in international enrollment. The Canadian Bureau for International Education reports that between 2010 and 2020, the country saw an increase of 135% in international student enrollment (CBIE, 2022). According to Usher (2021):

> Since about 2000, the number of international students at the postsecondary level in Canada has risen dramatically, from just under 40,000 in the late 1990s to almost 345,000 in 2018-19. This rise was gradual at first, then very rapid from 2009 onwards. (p. 19)

The proactive measures taken by the Canadian government since the launch of Canada's first *International Education Strategy* in 2014 may account for the gradual rise referred to by Usher (2021). The government's primary goal was to increase the number of international students in Canada. In 2014, it promised to collaborate with provinces and territories, Canadian educational institutions, and other stakeholders to double the size of the international student population from 239,131 to over 450,000 by 2022 (Esses et al., 2018).

Sending Countries

Like the trends in the United States, China and India are the top two countries that send students to Canada. However, unlike in the United States, where most students come from China, India is the leading country of origin for international students in Canada. China and India account for over 50% of Canada's international student enrollment (CBIE, 2022). CBIE reported that in 2021, international students in Canada came from the top ten countries: India, China, France, Iran, Vietnam, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the United States, Nigeria, and Mexico. These ten countries accounted for 72.8% of the total number of international students in

Canada. Asian countries are well represented in Canada; similar to the United States, Nigeria is the only African country in the top ten countries of origin for international students in Canada (CBIE, 2022).

Places of Study

Regarding where students go to study in Canada, it is noted that they are not evenly distributed among all the provinces and territories. Ontario hosted 47.7% of all students, which translated into 292,240 students. British Columbia hosted 22% of the students in second place, or 134,860 international students. So, most international students in Canada are concentrated in Ontario and British Columbia. Quebec held third place by hosting nearly 15% of all international students in Canada (CBIE, 2022).

A Growing Student Mobility in a Globalized World

Though tertiary-level students have always crossed borders to earn degrees in other countries, the rate at which people travel nowadays is unprecedented. In 2021, around the world, 6,440,413 students traveled for higher education purposes (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.b). More than 1.5 million of these students went to Canada and the United States. Given the number of students going to these two destinations, Canada and the United States play a key role in international education, successfully positioning themselves as top destinations for international students.

Many factors contribute to the rising number of globally mobile students pursuing higher education. Globalization, internationalization, the rise of the knowledge economy, and increasing competition among nations to attract international students and talents are key elements driving this growth in student mobility.

Globalization

"Globalization is probably the most pervasive and powerful feature of the changing environment" (Knight, 2008, p. 4). In the words of Maringe and Foskett (2012), globalization "entails the opening up and coming together of business, trade, and economic activities between nations, necessitating the need for greater homogenization of fundamental political, ideological, cultural, and social aspects of life across different countries of the world" (p. 1). Many scholars attribute the globalization of the world to advances made in information and communication technologies [ICTs] (Guruz, 2011; Knight, 2008; Solimano, 2006). ICTs can be considered catalysts for a more globalized world, assuming their role in lowering barriers to interaction and communication across borders. A definition from the International Monetary Fund (2018) also connects the phenomenon of globalization to the development of ICTs. It stresses the necessity to open up the world economy and facilitate the movement of people and goods. It reads as follows:

> Economic "globalization" is a historical process, the result of human innovation and technological progress. It refers to the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through the movement of goods, services, and capital across borders. The term sometimes also refers to the movement of people (labor) and knowledge (technology) across international borders. (Para. 8)

In a globalized world, the movement of people and the knowledge they bring are of central importance. Therefore, Knight (2008) defined globalization as "the flow of people, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology, and economy across borders, resulting in a more interconnected and interdependent world" (p. 4). For this study, I used Knight's definition of

globalization. As the world transforms into a global village, movement across borders has become more accessible, increasing the possibility of crossing borders for education.

Connecting mobility to globalization, Solimano (2006) wrote that "Talent mobility has increased with globalization, the spread of new information technologies, and lower transportation costs" (p. 1). While globalization has resulted in an increase in the spread of knowledge and goods globally, more importantly, it has led to greater mobility of people and talent. International students are part of this growing group of mobile individuals, and their mobility is also a consequence of a phenomenon related to globalization known as the knowledge economy.

The Knowledge Economy

Globalization and continuous advances in ICTs have moved the world into a new kind of economy. According to Guruz (2011), "The ICT revolution is transforming the industrial society into the knowledge society" (p. 6). As a result, the world has entered an era in which knowledge acquisition is of primary importance for the competitiveness of nations (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). Stromquist and Monkman asserted, "In a globalized world, as technology becomes its main motor, knowledge assumes a powerful role in production, making its possession essential for nations if they are successfully to pursue economic growth and competitiveness" (p. 12).

In the same line, Guruz (2011) added, "Knowledge and people with knowledge are the key factors of development, the main drivers of growth, and the major determinants of competitiveness in the global knowledge economy" (p. 7). Therefore, it seems logical that nations compete to attract highly skilled individuals who travel worldwide to increase their knowledge capital and prepare for the new economy.

Per the World Bank's recommendations, to successfully engage in the knowledge economy, nations must improve the following four sectors, which the financial institution describes as important pillars upon which the knowledge economy rests. The four pillars are, according to Chen and Dahlman (2006):

- An economic incentive and institutional regime that provides good economic policies and institutions that permit efficient mobilization and allocation of resources and stimulate creativity and incentives for the efficient creation, dissemination, and use of existing knowledge.
- Educated and skilled workers who can continuously upgrade and adapt their skills to efficiently create and use knowledge.
- An effective innovation system of firms, research centers, universities, consultants, and other organizations that can keep up with the knowledge revolution and, tap into the growing stock of global knowledge and assimilate and adapt it to local needs.
- A modern and adequate information infrastructure that can facilitate the effective communication, dissemination, and processing of information and knowledge. (p. 4)

For almost all four pillars of the knowledge economy, higher education has a vital role in making nations participate in the novel economy of the 21st century.

Marginson and van der Wende (2007) stated:

> Higher education is implicated in all the changes related to globalization. Education and research are key elements in the formation of the global environment, being foundational to knowledge, the take-up of technologies, cross-border association, and sustaining complex communities. (p. 7)

As a result, the world has seen a proliferation of higher learning institutions that attract students from all corners of the world, increasing their mobility. As Guruz (2011) noted, nations that want to take advantage of the global knowledge economy need to leverage their "capacity to participate at least to some extent in generating, accessing, and sharing knowledge" (p. 18).

For nations to compete in the knowledge economy, they need individuals with more advanced education. Travel has also become more accessible, so there is a more pronounced flow of people seeking advanced degrees in various parts of the world, especially in nations with higher-quality education systems, such as Canada and the United States.

Internationalization and the Expansion of Cross-Border Education

According to Jane Knight (2014), internationalization is another phenomenon that has transformed higher education. The growing number of internationally mobile students can be linked to this phenomenon. The scholar believes that "Internationalization is one of the major forces impacting and shaping higher education as it changes to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century" (p. 13). To adapt to globalization, nations worldwide had to implement several innovations. As a result, higher education became one of the sectors that underwent dramatic changes, translating into deeper involvement in internationalization at various levels. Jane Knight has extensively written about internationalization. She defined the concept in the following terms: "Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Her definition is the most commonly accepted one in the literature and is the one I adopted for this dissertation.

Internationalization includes various initiatives and activities. Some initiatives fall under the umbrella of Internationalization at Home, while others fall under the Internationalization

Abroad category, also known as cross-border education. “A critical development in the conceptualization of internationalization has been the recognition of ‘internationalization at home’ and ‘cross-border education’ as two pillars of the internationalization process” (Knight, 2014, p. 2). “Internationalization at Home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015a, p. 69). Initiatives under this category focus mainly on the curriculum, the programs, the teaching and learning processes, and the extracurricular activities, ensuring an international and intercultural dimension in the teaching-learning process without the students needing to cross borders (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Knight, 2014).

On the other hand, internationalization abroad includes the following activities: (a) international cooperation and development projects; (b) institutional agreements and networks; (c) the international/intercultural dimension of the teaching/learning process, curriculum, and research; (d) mobility of academics through exchange, fieldwork, sabbaticals, and consultancy work; (e) recruitment of international students; (f) student exchange programs and semesters abroad; (g) joint/double degree programs; and (h) twinning partnerships and branch campuses (Knight, 2006, p. 18). Most of these initiatives require mobility across borders, hence the term cross-border education. Cross-border education is “the movement of people, knowledge, programs, providers, and curriculum across national or regional jurisdictional borders” (Knight, 2006, p. 18). International student recruitment falls under this category. Therefore, the exponential growth in student mobility witnessed today is strongly linked to internationalization because of cross-border education and growing international student recruitment. When higher education institutions proactively engage in recruiting international students, they contribute to

the development of cross-border education and consequently increase the mobility of international students.

International Students' Rationales for Selecting Host Destinations

Nowadays, various destinations compete to attract international students. In this context, where students have more options to choose from, how do international graduate students narrow their choices down to one country? What makes them select a specific country over another for studying abroad? What factors in the prospective host country do they consider when deciding on a particular destination? Is it the country itself or the institution that matters most? Do students consider the program of study before selecting a study destination? To answer these questions, scholars have traditionally used the push-pull framework to analyze students' decision-making processes and explain the ultimate selection of the host country, the city, and the final institution. Push-pull factors influence the decision to study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Woodfield, 2012). Therefore, the push-pull framework informed this study, which focused exclusively on international graduate students.

Push-Pull: A Framework for International Student Mobility

In a study published in 2002, Mazzarol and Soutar sought to identify the motivating factors that guide international students in choosing a host country, a host institution, and a program of study. A search in *Google Scholar* (2022) revealed that their push-pull framework has been cited over 2,000 times in the past twenty years. This demonstrates that scholars have extensively used the model to explain international student mobility. On the one hand, the framework focuses on the reasons for leaving a home country for higher education (i.e., push factors). On the other hand, it explains the reasons that make a destination more attractive than others (i.e., pull factors). In the context of this study, I put a stronger emphasis on the pull factors

rather than the push factors because the purpose was to find the factors attracting international graduate students to Canada and the United States.

While "push factors operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study, pull factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82). Furthermore, these scholars also claimed that "Some of these factors are inherent in the source country, some in the host country, and others in the students themselves" (p. 82).

In their framework, the decision-making process follows three distinct stages, during which:

1. A student decides to study abroad instead of studying at home.
2. A student considers a variety of pull factors within a host country and elects to study there.
3. A student considers various institutional pull factors and makes their final decision. (p. 83)

Pull factors related to institutions are reputation and quality, often expressed in institutional rankings, the range of courses offered, and market profile. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) believed that "Quality of reputation is likely to remain the most important factor influencing study destination choice" (p. 90). They found six important pull factors in the push-pull framework, which allows one to understand "the influences that motivate a student's selection of a host country" (p. 83).

1. Knowledge and awareness of the host country in the home country: This is translated into the branding and marketing of the host country's higher education in the home country. Examples are Edu Canada, Education USA, the British Council, and Campus France. Another factor contributing to the host country's knowledge and awareness is the

destination's reputation, the quality of its education, and the value and recognition of its degrees in the home country.

2. Referral and personal recommendations the destination receives from the students' friends, family, and alumni of the destination.
3. Cost: It includes fees, living expenses, travel, safety, crime level, discrimination, and the presence of students from the same country. Regarding the presence of students from the same country, Mazzarol and Soutar believed that it plays a crucial pulling role because, as their findings suggested: "Once a host country has succeeded in attracting relatively large numbers of students from a particular source country, their presence will serve as an additional 'pull' factor" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 86). Cost also includes the availability of part-time work, an essential pull factor, especially for students from lower socio-economic status. "Many host countries offer students the right to undertake a certain amount of part-time work under their visas. For many students, this is a means to make the cost of obtaining an international education possible" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 89).
4. Climate: This factor includes study climate, physical climate, environment, and lifestyle.
5. Geographic proximity: This factor considers the distance and time difference between the home and the host country. It also allows students to travel between their home country and the host destination in a more accessible way.
6. Social links refer to family members and relatives living in the host destination and those who have previously studied in the host destination.

The push-pull framework (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) has significantly contributed to the literature and informed policies worldwide. It is a solid framework for analyzing international

student mobility. However, it has limitations (Lee, 2008). To develop the framework, the scholars surveyed and interviewed current and prospective students from four countries applying to or attending Australian institutions. The countries represented were China, India, Indonesia, and Taiwan. The researchers had 2,485 participants contribute to three different studies. In addition to the limited number of countries represented, 81% of the respondents were undergraduate students. Therefore, the results may not provide much insight into international graduate students' decision-making processes and what attracts them to a country, considering the age difference, maturity, and career expectations. For example, the study from India was mainly composed of prospective postgraduate students compared to other countries. They highly rated factors such as job opportunities, accepted entry qualifications, the institution's reputation, host qualification recognition, quality of education in the host country, and intention to migrate. Other samples, mainly undergraduates, did not rate these factors as highly.

International students form a very heterogeneous group with varied needs and motivations for studying abroad. Consequently, while this framework is informative, it may not fully explain the rationales for studying abroad at the graduate level. Building on the framework, I sought to find the reasons that led select international graduate students to choose Canada and the United States as their study destinations. Despite Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) belief that both push and pull factors guide students in their decision to study abroad, this specific study focused more on the pull factors within the host countries than the push factors from the students' home countries. My goal was to understand the elements that make a specific destination more attractive than others. Therefore, I primarily used the framework to design interview questions that elicit the most significant pull factors attracting international graduate students to the United States and Canada.

Factors Pulling International Students to Specific Destinations

Focusing on Canada as a host destination, Chen (2007) studied the factors influencing East Asian students' selection of Canada as a study abroad destination and their subsequent choice of final institution. The participants were from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The researcher developed a framework explaining the factors attracting international graduate students to Canada. The pull factors included academic quality, reputation, the prestige of the degree, rankings, research technology, business expertise, and a positive environment, including peace, safety, diversity, multiculturalism, and climate. Economic costs, such as affordable tuition fees and expenses, also emerged as pull factors toward Canada. Other factors included political ties, immigration policies, including the visa process, cultural aspects, the use of English as the medium of instruction and as an official language, and finally, the availability of financial aid (p. 761).

Chen (2007) also found factors inherent to Canadian institutions that international graduate students find attractive: Those factors are the reputation of the institution and the academic program, the quality of Canadian graduate programs, which most respondents perceived as equal to the American ones, faculty, career plans, mobility, location of the institution, availability of financial aid and scholarship, as well as the application process to the specific institution (p. 761). Students found an easy application process attractive. Funding and research expertise at an institutional level were also found to attract international students to Canada. In terms of the visa application process, Chen found that some students ended up in Canada because of difficulties getting into a program of study or obtaining a student visa to enter the United States. So, gaining easy entry into a country is also a pull factor attracting students to a destination. The researcher found out that "Many Chinese students would have preferred the

United States as a destination; however, they were not able to obtain US student visas, and as a consequence, they accepted Canada as their second choice for the ease and speed of the Canadian visa process" (Chen, 2007, p. 765). The strength of Chen's study and the importance of its findings resides in the fact that the scholar focused only on graduate students who selected Canada as a host destination. The findings also revealed that when students struggle to gain entry into the US because of visa hurdles, Canada becomes an alternative destination. However, as participants were mainly from East Asian countries, there is a possibility that international graduate students from other parts of the world have different rationales for selecting Canada as a host destination.

Unlike Chen's (2007) study focusing on international graduate students coming to Canada, Adeyanju and Olatunji (2021) studied why undergraduate students from Nigeria selected Canada as a host destination. Based on semi-structured interviews with students, Nigerian parents, and academic advisors in Nigeria, they found that choosing Canada as a study-abroad destination was a conscious decision based on many factors. Beyond the reputation of Canadian higher education and its lower tuition, the researchers found that the visa process, employment opportunities in Canada before and after graduation, and permanent residence post-graduation were important factors driving self-funded Nigerian undergraduates to Canada. They believed that "Permanent residence is one of the incentives for parents and prospective students in Nigeria" (p. 13).

As far as the United States is concerned, Alberts and Hazen (2005) noted that two factors pull international students to the country: the quality of the education system and the funding opportunities available at the graduate level. Their study participants in the technical fields described quality as "better access to equipment such as research labs and computers" (p. 137).

For students in the social sciences, quality meant "breadth of courses available and interdisciplinary work" (p. 137). The researchers also found that when specific majors and research opportunities do not exist in some countries, their availability in a host destination is a pull factor to that country.

Lee (2008) conducted a case study of an American institution of higher education to understand the decision-making process of international students and to uncover their rationales for studying in the United States, particularly at a specific institution. She had 501 students respond to a Likert-type scale survey, and 24 of them answered open-ended interview questions. Her findings revealed that students choose their institution and, consequently, their host destination, the United States, based on the reputation of the institution and program, as well as the availability of specialized fields of study. She found that students pay attention to rankings. For many, obtaining a degree from the United States was considered prestigious due to the high quality of research at American institutions. "Many international students are highly drawn to the reputation and prestige of the university when making their decision to study abroad" (Lee, 2008, p. 322). Lee's participants also mentioned other factors that led them to the United States. These factors included having friends and family in the host country or destination city, the availability of financial assistance in the form of work/assistantship, and the potential for securing employment within the United States. Therefore, the opportunity for employment in the host country is also a crucial factor in attracting students to a study destination.

Han and Appelbaum (2016) also investigated why international graduate students in the STEM fields choose the United States as their host destination. They surveyed 787 international graduate students from 74 different countries, and their findings revealed that six main factors pull international graduate students to the United States: (a) higher quality of education, (b) the

opportunity to work with specific faculty members, (c) the cost of education, (d) future career opportunities, (e) the desire to experience living abroad, and (f) the desire to live in the United States and the proximity to friends/family living in the country.

Han and Applebaum (2016) were also interested in students' plans after graduation. 47.8% of their respondents expressed an intention to remain in the United States after graduating, citing future job opportunities as the most important reason for staying. As Lee (2008) found, Han and Applebaum's findings also indicate that career prospects in the host country may attract students to a particular destination.

Choudaha (2018) discussed the decline in international student enrollment at the graduate level in the United States during the fall semester of 2017. The decrease in STEM-related fields accounted for 47% of the overall decline. Choudaha argued that threats to employability opportunities and immigration issues may have deterred prospective graduate students from coming to the United States. These conclusions suggest that some international students prioritize employment prospects and immigration opportunities when selecting a host destination. According to Choudaha (2018), most STEM students in the United States are from India and "are highly sensitive to visa and immigration policies" (p. 20). The scholar noted that in 2017, there were numerous discussions and criticisms regarding the OPT and H-1B visas, as shown by the growing pressure to engage in the "curtailing of H-1B work visa and increasing scrutiny of Optional Practical Training (OPT)" (p. 2).

Bhandari et al. (2018) attributed the increasing international student mobility to a desire to develop employability skills internationally. According to them, "The opportunity to gain practical work experience is growing in importance as a driver of student mobility around the globe" (p. 5). Their statement suggests that work opportunities in the host country may be a pull

factor to a specific destination, whether it is for the short or long term. Bhandari et al. stated that "Globally, policies governing students' ability to work have impacted international students' numbers in top destination countries such as Canada, Germany, New Zealand, the UK, and the U.S." (pp. 5-6).

Gesing et al. (2021) examined the career pathways of 14 international students who graduated from the United States. Their findings revealed that work opportunities after graduation constitute a pull factor for international students to the United States (p. 77). When asked about the factors that influenced their decision to study in the United States, most students mentioned the quality of education, future career opportunities post-graduation, and the willingness to experience living abroad.

Like Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), de Wit (2008) also noted that specific pull factors attract international students to a particular destination. After reviewing the literature on push-pull factors, he categorized the pull factors into four groups: educational, political/social/cultural, economic, and geographical distance. Furthermore, de Wit noted that in addition to prestige and ranking, employment during and after studies is an essential factor in attracting international students to a country. Table 1 illustrates the various push and pull factors driving outward student mobility, according to de Wit.

Table 1

Push and Push Factors of Outward Student Mobility

Educational	Political/social/cultural
Higher education opportunities	Language factor
System compatibility	Cultural ties
Ranking/status higher education	Colonial ties
Enhanced value of a nation's degree	Lure of life
Diversity of the higher education system	Regional unity
The absorptive capacity of higher education	The stock of citizens of the country of origin
Active recruitment policy	Immigration policies
Cost of study	Strategic alliances with home country
Existing stock of national students	Academic freedom
Strategic alliances with home partners	
Economic	**Geographical distance**
Import export level	Geographical distance
Level of assistance	
Human resource development index	
Employment opportunities during studies	
Employment opportunities after studies	

Note. Adapted from de Wit (2008, p. 28)

Another study shedding light on international students and the factors that pull them to study abroad was from Nafari et al. (2017). These researchers focused on Iranian students specifically. They found that when Iranian students choose a study destination, they consider the availability of aid and scholarships and the cost issue. They also consider if the destination offers a better work environment. The host country's economic and political environment is also an important factor for Iranian students. Nafari et al. noted that "The availability of 'aids and scholarships' attracts students to study overseas, as with the financial support provided by the

host country or institution, they [international students] can afford their living and tuition costs" (p. 15).

Using the push-pull model, Ahmad et al. (2016) wanted to find the motivating factors influencing students to study abroad in a specific destination. Their study was limited to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the host destination and one area of study: hospitality and tourism management. However, their participants were adult learners and graduate students. They collected both quantitative and qualitative data (survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews) to find that different factors influence students in selecting the UAE as their host destination:

- Country attraction includes a safe, pleasant, and tolerant society, better employment prospects in the host country, and higher salaries.
- Institutional attraction encompasses degree recognition, program reputation, quality, and rankings. Respondents believed that "Studying at a highly recognized institution, no matter where it was located, positioned them well in their future career prospects and job opportunities" (Ahmad et al., p. 1098).
- Regarding visas, applicants face less burdensome application processes and restrictions, particularly for Muslim students. They noted that Muslim students chose the UAE, one of many Muslim countries offering programs of study in English. "Many international students from Muslim countries commented that it was extremely difficult to obtain a USA and Canada student visa, and many had been rejected; therefore, the UAE is a perfect alternative for them" (Ahmad et al., p. 1099).
- Additionally, there is motivation to learn another culture and language, specifically the Arabic language and culture, alongside a lack of discrimination.

The literature review exploring the factors that pull international students to their host destinations has shown that a variety of reasons influence their choices of host destinations. For some students, securing funding is important, while for others, the quality of the program and the reputation of the institution play a significant role in drawing them to a specific country. However, especially among graduate students, the availability of post-graduation work opportunities is often cited as a key factor in their destination preference. Recent scholarship on international student mobility indicates that researchers are linking post-study work programs to study-abroad destinations. As Tran et al. (2019) noted, "Post-study work rights are becoming increasingly influential in international students' decision of study destinations" (p. 56).

Overview of Post-Study Work Programs (PSWPs)

Once international students graduate, the crucial question they face is, what is next? The answer seems simple: They must join the workforce and start a career. The next question is, then, where to start a career? Do they start in their host destinations, or do they go back to their home countries? Do they migrate to a third destination? For those who want to start a career in the host country, post-study work programs constitute the legal avenue to do so because they "allow international students to seek employment opportunities in the host country's labor market, often with few or no restrictions" (Trevena, 2019, p. 18).

Trevena (2019) defined post-study work programs as "policy instruments and key migration policies designed by governments in prominent study destinations to attract and retain international students" (p. 6). She added that "The programs allow international students to extend their stay after graduation to gain valuable international work experience in the host country's labor market" (p. 6). Additionally, in some countries, the additional time provided by the post-study work program "adds to the period to fulfill permanent residency requirements" (p.

18), making them a route for “high skilled migration” (p. 6). So, in an era of global talent competition, post-study work programs attract international students to a specific destination for their studies and retain them post-graduation: “Countries entering the ‘global competition for talent’ are increasingly developing competitive migration policies aimed at attracting and retaining international students. One of the key ones is the post-study work offer” (Trevena, 2019, p. 5). Nowadays, PSWPs are available in many countries hosting international students: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the US, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, etc. (Trevena, 2019).

The United States and Canada allow their international graduates to extend their stay after graduation and gain work experience through post-study work programs. In Canada, international students can apply for the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP), while those in the United States can access the Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT).

The Canadian Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP)

Canada’s PGWPP started in 2003 (Trevena, 2019). “Work permits issued under the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program allow international students who have graduated from a participating Canadian post-secondary institution to gain valuable Canadian work experience. Students may work in Canada for up to three years after graduation” (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2006). Section. What is the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program?). According to Trevena (2019), it is an open work permit that allows graduates to work for any employer in any industry. The employment does not need to be related to the student’s area of study, and the permit does not stipulate that the students get a job offer at the time of application. In most cases, graduates who have applied for the permit can start employment while waiting for the final decision (IRCC, 2024a). The application receipt serves as temporary

authorization to engage in employment. Under the permit, a graduate can work full-time, part-time, or even be self-employed. The permit's validity depends on the length of the program of study. Canada issues work permits to international graduates with a validity ranging from a minimum of eight months to three years (IRCC, 2006). There is no distinction between students who graduated from STEM majors and those who did not (IRCC, 2024a).

Students are eligible for only one permit during their time in Canada, regardless of the number of degrees obtained. This permit cannot be renewed (IRCC, 2006), unlike in the United States, where students can apply for work authorization under the OPT after completing a bachelor's degree and can apply again after finishing a master's degree. International graduates in Canada have up to 180 days after completing their programs to apply for a work permit. They can apply either from within Canada or from outside of Canada (IRCC, 2006). Regarding cost, the application fee for the permit is CAD 255 [CAD 155 for the work permit and CAD 100 for the open work permit holder ((IRCC, 2006; Trevena, 2019). The government may also grant an open work permit to the graduate's spouse or common-law partner (IRCC, 2024a).

After completing the work experience under the post-graduation work permit, international graduates who wish to remain in Canada can apply for permanent residence, and one option is to apply for the Canadian Experience Class within Express Entry. "You've studied in Canada, and maybe you even have Canadian work experience. Now, you'd like to live here permanently. We have options for you to become a permanent resident!" (IRCC, 2024b, para. 1)

The U.S. Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Before introducing the OPT, it is important to clarify that international education in the United States is a heavily regulated sector. Higher education institutions that want to enroll international students and scholars must receive government approval through the Student and

Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) under the Department of Homeland Security. One important tool in regulating international education is the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) program. SEVIS is:

> The Web-based system that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) uses to maintain information on Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)-certified schools, F-1 and M-1 students who come to the United States to attend those schools, U.S. Department of State-designated Exchange Visitor Program sponsors, and J-1 visa Exchange Visitor Program participants. (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2021, para. 1)

It is also described as "a critical tool in our [the United States'] mission to protect national security while supporting the legal entry of more than one million F, M, and J nonimmigrants to the United States for education and cultural exchange" (ICE, 2021, para. 1).

The SEVIS program controls and regulates activities such as authorizing the enrollment of international students, issuing visa paperwork, monitoring students' entry and exit from the country, and managing their employment and internship authorizations.

Most foreign nationals coming to the United States for academic purposes need to secure a student visa, known as the F-1 visa. This visa allows nationals from other countries to enter the United States. It is a non-immigrant visa under which international students can enroll in full-time academic or language training programs at institutions approved by the U.S. government (USCIS, 2020). Although there are other types of educational visas, such as the M-1 for vocational students and the J-1 for students and scholars involved in sponsored educational and cultural exchange programs, those are not included in this study. This research focuses exclusively on students holding an F-1 visa.

To legally engage in post-graduation employment, international students in the United States holding an F-1 visa must apply for the post-completion OPT. The OPT program, which began in 1992, allows international graduates to work under their student visas for one year, regardless of their fields of study (Miano, 2017). The definition of OPT is as follows: "Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment that is directly related to an F-1 student's major area of study" (USCIS, 2022, para. 1). USCIS further states that:

> Eligible students can apply to receive up to 12 months of OPT employment authorization before completing their academic studies (pre-completion) and/or after completing their academic studies (post-completion). However, all periods of pre-completion OPT will be deducted from the available period of post-completion OPT. (para. 1)

Unlike the PGWPP in Canada, graduates working under the OPT must find employment related to their fields of study. Once students submit their applications to USCIS, they are prohibited from starting employment until they receive official approval in the form of an Employment Authorization Document, also known as the EAD (USCIS, 2022)

Though students may be eligible for 12 months of practical experience under OPT, special conditions apply to those who have previously engaged in Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and pre-completion OPT. CPT does not impact OPT eligibility unless the employment under CPT lasts for a year or more. On the other hand, any time an international student spends working under pre-completion OPT will be subtracted from the total duration available for post-completion OPT (USCIS, 2022).

> CPT is alternative work-study, cooperative education, or any other type of required internship or practicum that is offered by sponsoring employers through cooperative agreements with the school ... but the student must request authorization for CPT from

> the student's Designated School Official (DSO). The CPT must be an integral part of an established curriculum (USCIS, 2025, Section B. F-1 Student Curricular Practical Training, para. 1).

Since CPT is a component of the school curriculum, USCIS mandates that it occurs during the course of study and before graduation.

STEM graduates have an exclusive type of OPT. The STEM OPT extension is available for graduates of approved STEM majors and allows them to extend their work experience for an additional 24 months (USCIS, 2025). Consequently, STEM graduates can gain up to 36 months of work experience under the OPT program, while non-STEM graduates are limited to 12 months of practical experience in the United States.

While Canada allows its graduates to use the post-study work program only once, the United States allows students to engage in post-study employment after each level of study. For instance, students can work under OPT after a bachelor's degree, return to school for a master's degree, and be eligible for OPT again upon completing that second degree at a higher level (USCIS, 2025).

In terms of cost, students must pay an application fee of $410. To expedite the process, they are required to pay an additional $1,500. Both the filing fees and the premium processing fees have increased to $470 and $1,685, respectively (USCIS, 2023). Unlike in Canada, where a student's spouse or common-law partner can also be granted work authorization, in the United States, work authorization is restricted to the graduate only.

After completing their practical experience, students need to transition to the H-1B visa, a different temporary work visa, to remain in the United States and continue their employment for an additional three to six years. Those who do not make the transition often have no option but to

leave the country unless they can change their immigration status. McFadden and Seedorff (2017) noted that "OPT was designed to provide initial exposure and practical experience for students entering the workforce" (p. 40). They also remarked that students who wish to remain in the U.S. workforce after OPT must secure an H-1B visa, provided they have a continuous job offer and an employer willing to sponsor and petition them for the H-1B visa.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the literature pertaining to international student mobility. I explored topics relating to the increasing student mobility worldwide and the rationales explaining such growth. In doing so, I also explored the factors pulling international students to different countries for the purpose of higher education. Scholars have revealed various factors that help understand why students go to a specific country instead of another one. A lot has been said about international undergraduate students. Unfortunately, as far as international graduate students are concerned, there is still a need for more research to understand their decision-making process and choice of study destinations. The chapter also described the post-study work programs available in Canada and the United States. The next chapter introduces the methodology used to conduct this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology used in this study. I start by restating the research purposes and questions. Next, I introduce the specific methods and designs I employed and explain the rationale for their selection. I also describe the research settings, the participants, and the recruitment strategies. Furthermore, I discuss the types of data collected and the procedures followed to gather and analyze that data. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations and strategies to enhance the study's trustworthiness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic exploratory qualitative study was threefold. I conducted this research to:

d) Identify the factors guiding selected international graduate students to study in the United States and Canada.

e) Explore the selected students' perceptions of their experiences navigating employment through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) in Canada and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States. And,

f) Examine the similarities and differences in the selected students' rationales for choosing a study destination and their experiences navigating post-study employment in the host country.

This study aimed to explore the factors attracting selected international graduate students to Canada and the United States and uncover their experiences navigating employment in these two prominent study destinations. Using a comparative approach, I examined the mobility drivers that draw students to each country and the students' experiences with employment,

taking into account the requirements of the post-study work programs available in the United States and Canada.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative study, which sought to understand the motivating factors that brought selected international graduate students to Canada and the United States, capture their experiences navigating post-study work programs, and find similarities and differences in the students' rationales for choosing a study destination and their experiences pursuing post-study employment in the country of study:

1) What factors influenced the selected international graduate students to study in Canada and the United States?
2) How do the selected international graduate students describe their experiences navigating post-study employment in Canada and the United States, considering the respective post-study work program requirements?
3) In what ways (if any) are the rationales for choosing a study destination and the experiences of the selected international graduate students navigating post-study work programs in the two countries similar or different?

Rationales for Conducting an Exploratory Qualitative Research

As mentioned earlier, my main objectives were first to explore and identify the reasons that led selected international graduate students to choose Canada and the United States and then to uncover their experiences and perspectives as they navigate employment through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) and the Optional Practical Training (OPT). A review of the literature revealed limited attention devoted to international students' perceptions of their experiences navigating post-graduation employment under such programs. Scholars such

as Philip Altbach, Maureen S. Andrade, Rajika Bhandari, Lesleyanne Hawthorne, and Simon Marginson, to name a few, have dedicated much of their careers to studying international students in various parts of the world. However, very few researchers dive into the students' experiences post-graduation or approach the topic from the students' perspectives. In addition, a study comparing the Canadian PGWPP and the U.S. OPT from the students' viewpoints is a novelty.

Given the limited body of knowledge on the experiences of international students navigating post-study work programs, this study was exploratory. Stebbins (2008) argued that a limited body of knowledge regarding a specific topic or experience is a good rationale for conducting exploratory research. Stebbins added that "Researchers explore when they possess little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity, or situation they want to examine, but nevertheless have reasons to believe contains elements worth discovering" (p. 2). Therefore, the experience of international graduate students with post-study work programs in Canada and the United States falls under the category of under-researched topics that warrant an exploratory approach.

Once a researcher decides to conduct an exploration, Stebbins (2008) recommends being flexible in looking for data and open-minded about locating it. He argued that using such an approach often yields inductively derived generalizations regarding the topic under investigation. However, for this specific exploratory research, my goal was not to arrive at findings meant for generalizations to all international graduate students in Canada and the United States. The findings can, nevertheless, point out specific directions for further research. Stebbins believes that, in general, exploratory research focuses on building generalizations and theories rather than confirming previous ones. Considering the importance of career prospects for international

graduate students who invest so much to earn degrees in countries other than their own, it is essential to start exploring how they navigate employment in their host nations. Findings from such an exploration may lead to more thorough research informing policymakers, higher education practitioners, students, and everyone else with a stake in international education.

In addition to the exploratory nature of the study, I used a qualitative research method. In their definition, Strauss and Corbin (1990) pointed out the fundamental difference between qualitative and quantitative research:

> By the term qualitative research, we mean any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons' lives, stories, behavior, but also about organizational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships. (p. 17)

Though there is no single definition of qualitative research, it is safe to note that when inquirers focus on collecting words rather than numbers, they are using a qualitative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Because I intended to focus on international graduate students' lives, stories, and experiences in Canada and the United States, I only collected qualitative data**.** According to Stebbins (2008), "In most exploratory studies, qualitative data predominate" (p. 2). Therefore, I derived my data from individual in-depth interviews and document analysis, and such data provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon from the students' perspectives. In the words of Merriam (2009), "Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p. 1). A renowned scholar and great proponent of qualitative research, Merriam, through

her quote, reinforced my conviction that a qualitative approach was the best avenue to conduct this study.

Various scholars have equated conducting qualitative research with uncovering people's lived experiences. Hatch (2002) similarly described the purpose of conducting qualitative inquiry. According to him, qualitative researchers study the lived experiences of real people in real settings (p. 6). For Hatch, the goal is to understand how people make sense of their everyday lives. Echoing the same belief, Merriam and Grenier (2019) noted that "Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (p. 7). Additionally, they affirmed that "Qualitative researchers are interested in knowing how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a particular context" (p. 4). Two other famous scholars, namely Creswell and Creswell (2018), also defined qualitative research as "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 41).

Considering my research purposes, I used a qualitative approach to understand why international graduate students select Canada and the United States for international education and uncover their experiences and perspectives on navigating post-study work programs in the two countries. I reviewed policy documents related to the OPT and the PGWPP to highlight similarities and differences between the two programs. Data garnered from interviews served a similar purpose regarding the students' experiences.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

"Qualitative inquiry is not a single thing with a singular subject matter" (Patton, 1990, p. 64). In the words above, Patton suggests that there are various ways and approaches to conducting a qualitative study. He believed that the approach to use depends on factors such as

the focus of the study, “the purposes”, “rationales”, and the types of “questions” asked (p. 65). Different scholars have labeled and categorized the myriads of qualitative approaches. Inquirers use terms like case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, narrative inquiry, etc. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch, 2002; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). For this dissertation, I conducted a basic exploratory study that was meant to serve as a starting point for an underexplored topic that deserves much more attention in the future.

Despite the variations in terminology regarding the categories and genres of qualitative research, common features distinguish qualitative research from other types of research. Identifying and highlighting these characteristics can provide researchers with the rationale for choosing the method or approach most suitable for their study. According to Yin (2011), defining qualitative research is not necessary. Instead, scholars should strive to incorporate the various characteristics of this research method into their design. Like Yin, many other scholars have extensively discussed the features of qualitative research. Drawing on their work, I summarize some of the most prevalent components of qualitative research found in the literature. These include the researcher’s role, the type of data to collect, and the methods and procedures for data collection and analysis.

Qualitative researchers conduct their inquiries in natural settings under real-world conditions, hence the label naturalistic inquiry (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 1990). This entails that, unlike positivist researchers, qualitative researchers do not go into laboratories to control and manipulate variables or the setting where the research occurs (Patton, 1990). They focus on the meaning that people assign to their lives and experiences and try to understand phenomena in-depth (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). “Qualitative research usually focuses on the meaning of real-life events, not just the occurrence

of the events" (Yin, 2011, p. 93). In their search for meaning, inquirers gather participants' perspectives, views, and understanding of the world and the phenomena under investigation (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2011).

The researcher plays a significant role as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Even though the researcher gathers participants' perspectives on the phenomenon, the researcher also brings their personal interpretation of the data. The interpretive framework of data analysis makes the inquirer's role even more salient since the researcher engages in the interpretation of the data.

Qualitative researchers analyze their data inductively and not deductively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2011). This means that there is no theory to test as there is in positivist research. "The strategy of inductive design is to allow the important analysis dimension to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be" (Patton, 1990, p. 44). Similarly, Merriam and Grenier (2019) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) believed that a theory, if any, should emanate from the data and be grounded in it.

Context is another feature that plays a significant role in qualitative research (Erlandson et al., 1993; Patton, 1990). Therefore, when inquirers analyze phenomena, they consider the specific context of these lives and experiences. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). This study is situated in the context of increased mobility of people. In the literature review, I have already explained how globalization and the increased national and institutional engagement in internationalization have contributed to the growing mobility of talent around the world. The need to train enough skilled workers to fuel the

knowledge economy and the increasing competition among nations to recruit and retain the best talents explains the mobility of millions of people traveling across the globe to earn degrees in the world's best institutions of higher learning.

Description of the Sites

There was no predetermined research site for this study. When designing this inquiry, I realized that California and New York host a considerable proportion of the international student population in the United States (IIE, 2022). In a similar vein, Ontario and British Columbia host the majority of international students in Canada (CBIE, 2022). For this reason, I initially intended to limit the study to international graduate students in these specific places. However, since post-study work programs are regulated at the national and federal levels, the rules guiding them are not specific to a province or a state. Therefore, there is no difference in the legal process international students generally go through to secure work authorization regardless of where they study and reside in their respective host countries. All international students must secure work authorization prior to pursuing post-study employment in the host destination. Consequently, I extended this study to any participant who met the inclusion criteria and was willing to share their insights on the phenomenon under investigation: the factors that brought them to their country of study and their experiences navigating employment under either the OPT or the PGWPP. Additionally, since I conducted all my interviews online using the video conferencing software Zoom, there was no need to restrict the study to a specific state or province. In the United States, the participants were recruited from four different institutions, while all participants in Canada came from the same university. All five institutions are located in urban areas and demonstrate strong commitments to research, though they differ in size and classification. Based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, Eastern

State University, a public institution in the United States, is classified as an R1 university, indicating very high research activity, with enrollment exceeding 20,000 students. Pacific Horizon and Sunrise University, both private, not-for-profit institutions, are likewise classified as R1 universities, each with enrollments surpassing 20,000 students. Starlight University distinguishes itself as an R2 institution, representing a high but not the highest level of research activity. It is a private, not-for-profit institution with the smallest student population, enrolling fewer than 5,000 students. In Canada, Northfield University is recognized as one of the premier public institutions in the country and emphasizes research; it is situated in an urban environment and boasts a very high student enrollment.

Participants and Recruitment Strategies

In the design phase of a study, two critical issues need the inquirer's attention. First, who are the specific people who can help the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Second, how many of them are needed to help understand the phenomenon? These two questions informed the strategies I used to recruit participants and determined the number of participants I wanted for this study.

Description and Number of Participants

It is essential to reiterate that the end goal of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize from a study but rather to gain a deep understanding of the cases and phenomena studied (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). This type of research aims to "maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in a particular context under study" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 82). Consequently, researchers are free to limit the sample size or participants to any number of people who can provide enough information to reach redundancy. As stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), redundancy is achieved when no additional

information is gained from continuing data collection. Accordingly, “Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in-depth on relatively small samples, even single cases (n = 1), selected purposefully” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Erlandson et al., who shared Patton’s viewpoint, justified the small sample size by positing that in qualitative research, quality matters more than quantity, and instead of information volume, researchers should look for information richness (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 84). Through this dissertation, my goal was not to generalize the findings from this study to all international students in Canada and the United States but to gain an in-depth understanding of the specific experiences of those studied. Consequently, I did not need many participants and did not aim to recruit a representative sample of the international student population.

My goal was to conduct the following study with a sample size of 12 international graduate students. Since I was using a comparative lens, I planned to recruit six participants from Canada and six others from the United States. In each country, I intended to interview three participants from the STEM majors and three others from non-STEM areas. As far as PSWPs were concerned, I thought comparing the experiences of STEM and non-STEM students was important because the OPT program in the United States allows graduates from specific STEM-related disciplines to work for 36 months after graduation compared to their peers from non-STEM-related fields who are limited to 12 months of post-study employment (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; USCIS, 2025). Such differentiation did not apply to the Canadian PGWPP.

Although I opened this study to all international graduate students in Canada and the United States. who met the inclusion criteria, I wanted to ensure I included the perspectives of international graduate students from China and India. These two countries play a prominent role

in international education and are the top two countries sending the biggest number of international students to Canada and the United States (CBIE, 2022; IIE, 2022).

I did not intend to recruit a sample that reflected the complete diversity of identities among international graduate students in Canada and the United States. However, I was confident that many students would be willing to participate in the study. Therefore, I wanted to try for maximum variability by including criteria such as gender, countries of origin, geographic areas, first languages, and disability in my screening process to ensure a diversity of perspectives. I decided that if too many volunteers had expressed their interest in the study, leading me to choose between potential participants, I would have considered prioritizing demographic variables not well-represented in my selection.

While implementing this study, I realized that finding volunteers to share their rationales for choosing a study destination and, more importantly, their experiences with the OPT and the PGWPP was not as easy as I expected. The timing and focus of the study may have explained the limited number of participants willing to be interviewed. Students nearing graduation and those just transitioning to employment may have limited time to participate in research. Others could be reluctant or fearful to share their perspectives on employment and immigration issues in their host countries, as demonstrated by the few participants who agreed to be interviewed before changing their minds. Therefore, since I did not have more volunteers than needed, I did not have to apply all the screening criteria I intended to use. Nevertheless, I interviewed at least one student from China and India in each country, and I was able to interview students who were in STEM and non-STEM areas of study.

I conducted this study with 11 international graduate students who expressed interest in participating and met the inclusion criteria. Table 2 provides details on the participants'

demographics. The participants came from eight regions: China, India, Brazil, North America, Europe, South America, and West Africa. To safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of students who might be identifiable by their countries of origin, I substituted the names of their countries with either the continent or the region of origin. All participants' names and institutions featured in this study are pseudonyms. Seven of the 11 participants studied in the United States, and four in Canada. Nine women participated in this study, compared to two men. Both males graduated from the United States; therefore, no male participants were recruited from Canada. Three participants completed a PhD, while eight were recruited at the master's level. Five participants earned degrees in STEM-related fields, whereas six pursued non-STEM-related degrees. Four of the seven students in the United States were in STEM areas, compared to one of the four interviewees in Canada.

In the United States, two of the seven participants earned a PhD, and five completed a master's degree. More participants in the United States completed STEM degrees than non-STEM degrees, with four STEM degrees compared to three non-STEM degrees. Two interviewees in the United States came from China. The remaining five U.S. participants came from India, Europe, South America, West Africa, and Asia. In Canada, there was one PhD student compared to three at the master's level. One interviewee completed a STEM degree, while the other three were in non-STEM fields. The four participants in Canada originated from China, India, Brazil, and North America.

Table 2

List of Participants

Participants [Pseudonyms]	Gender	Country or Region of Origin	Study Destination	Host Institution [Pseudonyms]	Area of Study	Degree Level
Anita	Female	India	Canada	Northfield	Non-STEM	Master's
Fei	Female	China	Canada	Northfield	Non-STEM	PhD
Gabriella	Female	Brazil	Canada	Northfield	STEM	Master's
Sophia	Female	North America	Canada	Northfield	Non-STEM	Master's
Emma	Female	China	United States	Eastern State	Non-STEM	PhD
John	Male	Europe	United States	Eastern State	Non-STEM	PhD
Maria	Female	South America	United States	Eastern State	Non-STEM	Master's
Ming	Female	China	United States	Pacific Horizon	STEM	Master's
Samba	Male	West Africa	United States	Starlight	STEM	Master's
Sarah	Female	Asia	United States	Sunrise University	STEM	Master's
Priya	Female	India	United States	Eastern State	STEM	Master's

Participant Recruitment

"Qualitative researchers seek to understand the meaning of phenomenon from the perspectives of those living it" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). Beyond gathering international graduate students' rationales for selecting Canada and the United States for graduate school, I wanted to explore how the participants perceived their experiences navigating post-study work programs in these countries. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "All sampling is done with some purpose in mind" (p. 185), hence my use of purposeful sampling to recruit participants for this

study. Patton (1990) described purposeful sampling as a sampling method through which the researcher uses different strategies to recruit "information-rich cases", defined as "those from which one can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 169).

Based on Patton's recommended strategies to attain purposeful sampling, I used criteria sampling by setting specific criteria that participants needed to meet to be included in this study. In Hatch's words (2002), criterion samples "are made up of individuals who fit particular predetermined criteria" (p. 99). Criterion sampling allowed me to focus the study on a specific group of international graduate students who could share their rationales for studying in Canada and the United States, in addition to sharing their experiences navigating employment under their post-study work programs. As Hatch (2002) noted, interviewees "should be experienced and knowledgeable in the area you are interviewing about" (p. 64). Therefore, in the United States, I recruited international graduate students in both STEM and non-STEM fields who were either employed or seeking employment under the OPT program. In Canada, I recruited international graduate students in STEM and non-STEM fields who were also employed or seeking employment under the PGWPP. In summary, participants needed to be international graduate students in either STEM or non-STEM fields who were working or looking for employment under the respective post-study work programs available in Canada and the United States. Graduate students include those at both the master's and doctorate levels.

Once I established my inclusion criteria, I primarily relied on snowball sampling to recruit participants. According to Patton (1990), snowball sampling or chain sampling is an approach that involves identifying study participants based on recommendations and suggestions from knowledgeable individuals (p. 176). Most of the participants in the study were referred to

me by my contacts who were either international students themselves or colleagues and mentors familiar with international students through their personal or professional networks.

To recruit participants, I designed flyers, one for Canada and one for the United States, inviting international graduate students who met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. The flyers described the study, my research goals, contact information, the kind of participants needed, and the duration of the interviews. I emailed the flyers to my contacts in the United States and Canada, including friends, colleagues, and international student advisors, asking them to share the study with international students.

The flyer contained a link to a Qualtrics survey that gathered demographic information from interested participants who had to confirm that they were navigating employment under the OPT or PGWPP. Additionally, the survey offered an electronic version of the consent form, which prospective participants needed to read and sign before I contacted them to arrange an interview. I followed this process to ensure that students did not feel pressured to participate. I wanted to let them decide when to initiate contact, thereby protecting their privacy and confidentiality. In a few cases, adhering to this protocol cost me some participants who clicked the “I agree” button but failed to provide their names or email addresses, leaving me without a way to reach out to them to set up the interviews.

Since I was based in the United States and had more contacts there, I easily recruited enough interview participants. Seven students expressed interest in the study, and I interviewed all of them. However, I struggled to find participants in Canada. For example, I conducted my first interview in the United States at the end of August 2023, but my first Canadian interview did not occur until the end of November 2023. By February 2024, I had completed all my

interviews in the United States. It was not until May 2024 that I conducted three more interviews in Canada, highlighting the challenges I faced in recruiting participants there.

The first interview in Canada resulted from reaching out to a person who had access to a listserv of international students at her institution, as well as another listserv of colleagues across Canada who work directly with these students. Two weeks later, I contacted international student advisors at Canadian institutions with at least a thousand international students. They shared the study details, but no students volunteered. Targeting the social media pages of international student associations yielded no results. Friends of friends studying in Canada initially agreed to be interviewed but later changed their minds. Fortunately, in May 2024, a friend who previously lived in Canada heard about the study and knew some international students navigating the PGWPP. After sharing the study details with them, three students agreed to be interviewed, bringing the total number of interviewees in Canada to four. All of them came from the same institution but were from different countries.

Data Collection

This section focuses on the type of data I collected as part of this inquiry.

Data Sources

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), in naturalistic inquiry, "The preponderantly used instrument is the human being" (p. 266), who collects data from human sources through interviews and observation. The human instrument also collects data from non-human sources such as documents and records (p. 267). Therefore, interviewing people, observing them and their activities within a setting, and analyzing documents and artifacts are three main ways to obtain qualitative data (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Patton,

1990; Yin, 2011). For this study, I reviewed OPT and PGWPP documents and interviewed 11 international graduate students.

Document Review

I reviewed policy documents relating to the PGWPP and the OPT to gain a better understanding of the policies guiding PSWPs in Canada and the United States and to supplement and triangulate students' views. Bowen (2009) stated that "Documents could be both printed and electronic (computer-based and internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2018) recommends reviewing documents as a strategy when researchers want to gain a general understanding of the content and context of a phenomenon. According to the CDC, reviewing documents allows researchers to gather background information on a topic or an organization, enabling them to "understand the history, philosophy, and operation" of a program or an organization (p. 1). The documents used in the study were publicly available on the websites of the Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). I consulted these websites to research the requirements of each program from the policymakers' point of view. Subsequently, I used what I learned to point out similarities and differences between the programs, inform the design of my interview protocol, and triangulate the data from the interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To uncover international graduate students' rationales for choosing a study destination and to explore their perspectives and experiences navigating post-study work programs in Canada and the United States, I used interviews as the primary source of data. Qualitative interviews allow the inquirer to understand the participants' experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and uncover their perspectives (Hatch, 2002). Rubin and Rubin defined qualitative interviews as

"conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion. The researcher elicits depth and details about the research topic by following up on answers given by the interviewee during the discussion" (p. 4). Though there are various ways of conducting qualitative interviews, I employed semi-structured interviews in this study. I started with guiding questions but was "open to following leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions" (Hatch, 2002, p. 94).

The interview protocol was divided into three parts. The first part elicited background and demographic information from the participants and was meant to bring them smoothly into the conversation. The second part explored the interviewees' rationales for selecting their study destinations. The final part allowed the participants to share their experiences navigating the OPT or the PGWPP. Following Rubin and Rubin's recommendations (2005), I asked interviewees some main questions to allow them to share their perspectives and experiences relating to the topic. The questions were mostly open-ended so that participants could respond using their own terms, thus sharing their perspectives. I used follow-up questions to gather additional information or clarifications. Lastly, I often probed to bring the conversation back on topic when necessary (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

I originally planned to conduct follow-up interviews with selected participants after the initial data analysis to elaborate on important themes emerging from the data and to explore topics that needed further investigation. However, I was unable to complete them due to ongoing challenges in recruiting participants and the extended time it took to collect the 11 interviews used in this study. Additionally, the participants generously shared their experiences in such details that another round of interviews was unnecessary.

Data Collection Procedures

I interviewed participants using Zoom, a video-conferencing software. The online interviews lasted approximately one hour on average. To express interest in the study, participants completed a short survey on Qualtrics, which was linked to the flyer attached to an email. After that, I contacted them to schedule the interviews. Once we agreed on a date and time, I sent the participants a link to the virtual meeting. All participants attended the interview at the agreed-upon date and time. Data collection began after I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Kent State University. All participants consented for their interviews to be recorded. Some participants had their webcams on, while others kept theirs off. I utilized the software Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews, which saved me considerable time. After the software completed the transcriptions, I reviewed the interviews in full, compared them to the audio recordings, and corrected any inaccuracies from the automated transcription.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics is of central importance in research. "Research in general and qualitative research, in particular, are viewed by most qualitative scholars as moral, ethical endeavors because they are human endeavors" (Preissle, 2008, p. 273). Consequently, inquirers must demonstrate ethical standards and behaviors in all aspects of the research process. To do so, researchers can follow the three principles of the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The report provides valuable guidance for conducting research involving human subjects in the United States. It stipulates that researchers must respect their participants, protect their privacy and confidentiality, and offer them the right to participate or not. In the process, researchers should not cause harm and should assess risks and benefits accordingly (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research,

1979). Following these three principles is even more important in qualitative research, as most of the data comes from human beings. The involvement of human participants implies some risks and benefits, hence the need to protect participants (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2011).

In this study, interviewees did not receive any payment for their participation. The only foreseeable benefit was their contribution to expanding the knowledge regarding international graduate students' rationales for selecting their countries of study and sharing their experiences navigating post-study work programs in the United States and Canada (Hatch, 2002). Even though the participants' experiences were not meant for generalization, their involvement in this research resulted in valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

I demonstrated ethical standards by applying for the mandatory Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Kent State University and followed all its requirements and guidelines before engaging in participant recruitment and data collection. I clearly informed participants and any gatekeepers about my research purposes and goals and took careful measures to protect the participants. According to Hatch (2002), "Full disclosure of research intentions and the clear message that participation is voluntary are essential elements of genuine informed consent" (p. 67). Goyal et al. (2019) defined the term as follows:

> Informed consent is a process for obtaining permission from prospective research participants to be part of a research study while providing them with information about the nature of the study and the potential benefits or harm associated with participating in it. (p. 1895)

I always asked participants for their permission before recording the interviews. All interviewees read and signed the electronic consent form. They understood that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study without any consequences (Hatch, 2002).

No question was mandatory, particularly if interviewees felt uncomfortable providing an answer. They were given the opportunity to ask questions both before and after the interviews. Participants were fully aware of what they were involved in before giving their consent.

Data Management

There was no significant risk associated with this study. However, international graduate students were invited to share their rationales for choosing a study destination and their perspectives on immigration and employment policies designed by their host countries. These experiences could be positive or negative. I did not want the students to feel reluctant to discuss the topic for fear of being identified. Therefore, I needed to protect their privacy and confidentiality, ensuring their statements could not be traced back to them. After collecting the data, I needed to store it and work with it for the remaining part of the dissertation. I knew storing participants' data could pose risks unless I took secure measures to safeguard it. I removed any identifiable information and replaced names and institutions with pseudonyms. To further protect students who could be identified through their countries of origin, I replaced their countries with either the continent or region of origin. Once I removed personal identifiers, I stored the data on my password-protected laptop, which no one besides me had access to. Additionally, I backed up the data to prevent potential loss due to computer malfunction.

I was reflexive and ethical while conducting the interviews and analyzing the data. During the interview process, part of my reflexivity strategies included taking notes of my thoughts as the respondents answered. I also recorded the participants' comments and reactions. In my final product, I presented all perspectives. I safeguarded participants' information and maintained their confidentiality at all stages of the research process. I showed respect to the participants and avoided leading them with my questions in any specific direction. The study

focused on the students' perspectives and experiences, which they were invited to describe as they saw fit.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study aimed to uncover the factors that influenced 11 international graduate students to pursue their education in the United States or Canada. It also explored how the students perceived their experiences navigating post-study work programs (PSWPs) in these destinations. I collected semi-structured interviews and transcribed them using the software Otter.ai before uploading them into the qualitative computer program NVivo for data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As Patton (1990) stated, "Data interpretation and analysis involve making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said" (p. 347). These words ideally describe my goals for the analysis section of the inquiry. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. After completing the first interview, I analyzed it to identify emerging patterns. This strategy enabled me to use insights from the initial analysis to inform subsequent interviews, modify my interview protocol, adjust some questions, or explore others in depth.

Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull framework informed this study, particularly the first research question. The authors predicted specific factors that push students out of their home countries and pull them to particular destinations. However, the framework dates back to 2002, and international higher education has experienced many changes since then. What attracted international students to study abroad in 2002 may differ from what attracts them today. Consequently, during my analysis, I initially bracketed the knowledge acquired from the framework, analyzed the data collected to identify the factors that drew my participants to

Canada and the United States, and then returned to the framework for comparison. This approach helped determine if any of the factors predicted by Mazzarol and Soutar in 2002 aligned with the rationales emerging from the data I collected.

Before interviewing students on their experiences with PSWPs in the United States and Canada, I reviewed policy documents related to the PGWPP and the OPT. This review deepened my understanding of the policies and their requirements. In the literature review, I provided an overview of these programs from the policymakers' perspectives. Analyzing individual interviews offered insights into PSWPs from the students' viewpoints.

There are different approaches and methods for analyzing qualitative data. In this study, I used thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns(themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke asserted that the purpose of thematic analysis is to find patterns or themes in the data. A theme, according to them, is "something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). In other words, themes represent something "prevalent" in the data. Therefore, as a researcher and the instrument of data collection, the purpose of my analysis was to find the "prevalent", "predominant", and important themes that reflected the content of the data I collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83) and use those final themes in the write-up of the findings of this study. To identify themes in thematic analysis, qualitative researchers should follow these six steps: (1) familiarize themselves with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review the themes, (5) define and name the themes, and finally, (6) produce the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Data transcription helped me familiarize myself with the data. Although I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews, I needed to check for inaccuracies and correct them to ensure I

faithfully captured what participants shared. During this process, I listened to and read the interviews in their entirety. Once completed, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo and reviewed them again before starting the coding process.

I generated initial codes by identifying relevant words, phrases, or sentences based on the research questions and labeling them. Once I completed the coding process, I searched for themes by grouping the generated codes into distinct potential themes, ensuring that the data supported such groupings. I assigned names to the themes and revised them before using them to write the findings of this study, supported by quotes and extracts that served as evidence for the themes. As Braun and Clark (2006) noted, "The task of the write-up of a thematic analysis is to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (p. 93). After analyzing the data and making interpretations, I captured and shared the similarities and differences in the students' experiences across the two host nations.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as "the ways in which an inquirer can persuade his or her audience (including self) that the findings from an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (p. 290). They added that to ensure rigor and quality in quantitative research, scholars use internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. However, in naturalistic inquiry, the appropriate terms are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Given and Saumure (2008) explained these concepts as follows:

- Credibility: "A credible study is one where the researchers have accurately and richly described the phenomenon in question" (p. 895).

- "Transferability reflects the need to be aware of and to describe the scope of one's qualitative study so that its applicability to different contexts (broad or narrow) can be readily discerned" (p. 895).
- Dependability: "The researcher lays out his or her procedure and research instruments in such a way that others can attempt to collect data in similar conditions" (p. 896).
- "Confirmability reflects the need to ensure that the interpretations and findings match the data" and that "no claims are made that cannot be supported by the data" (p. 895).

Given and Saumure (2008) argue that by meeting the four criteria above, qualitative researchers can distinguish themselves from quantitative researchers and ensure the trustworthiness of their study. In their words, "Trustworthiness provides qualitative researchers with a set of tools by which they can illustrate the worth of their project outside the confines of the often-ill-fitting quantitative parameters" (p. 896).

I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework to establish trustworthiness in this qualitative study. These scholars recommended employing strategies like triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. I also provided a thick description and kept an audit trail and a reflexive journal during the process.

Hatch (2002) defined triangulation in simple terms as the "verification or extension of information from other sources" (p. 92). In addition to interviewing individual participants, I conducted document analysis. Obtaining data from multiple and different sources permitted verification and provided a broader insight into the phenomenon, adding to the credibility of the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested peer debriefing as another strategy to ensure credibility. It allows researchers to work with "knowledgeable and available colleagues to get

reactions to the coding, case summaries, analytic memos written during data analysis, and next-to-final drafts" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 423). Two of my colleagues and various mentors served as peer debriefers for the study and provided insights and guidance for this qualitative research. They challenged me at times, helped me be reflexive, and checked the congruence between the raw data and my interpretation of it.

Through member-checking, the researcher will return the data and transcripts to the participants for verification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Following the advice from Marshall and Rossman (2016), researchers must implement this step so that participants can inform them whether they "got it right" (p. 423). I had some participants confirm my findings by reviewing the interview transcripts and my initial interpretations of the data. In one instance, engaging in this process led me to reconsider my interpretation of the data and even eliminate a code I had developed during the analysis. One participant, who spoke about the reluctance of local employers to hire international graduates, told me during the member-checking process that he did not view this practice as hiring discrimination but rather understood the perspective of employers who face numerous challenges in recruiting and retaining international graduates on temporary visas when they can rely on equally qualified citizens and permanent residents who are not subjected to any work restrictions.

I conveyed the findings using thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Hatch, 2002) and kept a researcher's journal to document all my thoughts, reactions, interpretations, and decisions, from data collection, analysis, and interpretation to the conclusions. I remained reflexive throughout the process and was aware of my biases and personal values.

Delimitations

This study was conducted with specific delimitations in mind. As a researcher, I purposefully limited my participants to a particular category of international students. I only recruited international graduate students (master's or PhD) who had either completed their graduate degrees or were on their way to graduation and were navigating employment in the United States and Canada. This decision left out a significant number of international students, specifically undergraduate students. Few scholars focus on the needs of international graduate students, and this study was entirely devoted to them. I also purposefully excluded a specific category of international graduate students in the United States and Canada who did not fit this study. Despite being international students, J-1 sponsored students (i.e., those studying with financial sponsorship from governments or employers or those participating in educational and cultural exchange programs) did not take part in the study. Since most sponsorships come with specific requirements, such as returning home after graduation, starting a career in the host country is usually not an option for this group of international students.

This study also excluded international students preparing for licensed professions, such as nursing, law, social work, and teaching. Students in these fields face additional requirements and paperwork to gain the right to pursue employment in their host countries. In addition to applying for work authorization, such students have significant paperwork and exams to complete, making their experiences with PSWPs somewhat different from those of their peers who only need to graduate and apply for work authorization to engage in employment in the host nation.

The study focused on international students in Canada and the United States, two key players in cross-border education and leading destinations for international students. While many

countries offer opportunities for international education, this study did not explore the experiences of students outside of the United States and Canada.

The research questions also served as a delimitation. Research on the experiences of international students encompasses a variety of topics, including challenges that range from financial to socio-cultural and academic issues. However, in this study, I focused exclusively on the students' experiences with post-study work programs and the reasons influencing their choices of study destinations. The present research did not consider other topics or challenges encountered by international students.

This study specifically examined the OPT program in the United States and the PGWPP in Canada. While I acknowledge that international students may have other visa options and pathways for long-term employment and settlement in both countries, this study is intentionally focused on these two programs. By concentrating solely on the OPT and PGWPP, this research aims to provide a detailed understanding of international students' experiences and perspectives as they navigate employment in their host nations immediately after graduation. Future research could investigate programs such as the *Federal Skilled Worker Program* and *Provincial Nominee Program* in Canada or the *EB Visas* and *O Visas* in the United States.

Summary

The chapter discussed the methodology used in this study, which explored the drivers of student mobility to Canada and the United States, as well as the students' experiences with post-study work programs. After restating the research purposes and questions, I provided rationales that justified my choice of an exploratory qualitative research approach, grounding it in the literature. Additionally, I described the participants, recruitment strategies, data collection

methods, and strategies for data analysis. I also addressed ethics and trustworthiness. Finally, I concluded the chapter by stating the delimitations of the following study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was threefold: (1) to identify the factors guiding selected international graduate students to study in the United States and Canada; (2) to explore the selected students' perceptions of their experiences navigating employment through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) in Canada and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States; and (3) to examine the similarities and differences in the selected students' rationales for choosing a study destination, and their experiences navigating post-study employment in the host country.

Using a basic exploratory qualitative research design, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 international graduate students. As illustrated in Table 3, participants were from eight countries and completed their master's or PhD degrees in Canada and the United States. Seven of them graduated from U.S. institutions and four from Canada. These participants were based in various states and provinces, and all interviews were conducted online via Zoom. To protect the privacy of the participants, I used pseudonyms to replace their names and institutions.

Table 3

List of Participants

Participants [Pseudonyms]	Gender	Country/ Region of Origin	Study Destination	Host Institution [Pseudonyms]	Area of Study	Degree Level
Anita	Female	India	Canada	Northfield	Non-STEM	Master's
Fei	Female	China	Canada	Northfield	Non-STEM	PhD
Gabriella	Female	Brazil	Canada	Northfield	STEM	Master's
Sophia	Female	North America	Canada	Northfield	Non-STEM	Master's
Emma	Female	China	United States	Eastern State	Non-STEM	PhD
John	Male	Europe	United States	Eastern State	Non-STEM	PhD
Maria	Female	South America	United States	Eastern State	Non-STEM	Master's
Ming	Female	China	United States	Pacific Horizon	STEM	Master's
Samba	Male	West Africa	United States	Starlight	STEM	Master's
Sarah	Female	Asia	United States	Sunrise University	STEM	Master's
Priya	Female	India	United States	Eastern State	STEM	Master's

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. What factors influenced the selected international graduate students to study in Canada and the United States?
2. How do the selected international graduate students describe their experiences navigating post-study employment in Canada and the United States, considering the respective post-study work program requirements?

3. In what ways, if any, are the rationales for choosing a study destination and the experiences of the selected international graduate students navigating post-study work programs in the two countries similar or different?

The interview protocol primarily focused on the first two research questions and elicited responses from students regarding their reasons for studying in Canada and the United States and their experiences with PSWPs. The third research question aimed to identify similarities and differences in the students' motivations for studying in these two countries and their experiences navigating PSWPs.

Revised Methodology

This study originally aimed to explore three research questions: (1) the factors that attract selected international graduate students to study in Canada and the United States, (2) the selected students' experiences and perspectives on the OPT in the United States and the PGWPP in Canada, and (3) the similarities and differences in the reasons guiding these students to choose their study destinations and their experiences navigating post-study employment.

However, during data analysis, it became evident that the comparative aspect of the third research question was embedded in the entire study rather than functioning as a standalone question to explore. Presenting this comparison in isolation proved impossible. As a result, the third research question was not given its own section but instead was integrated throughout the study, particularly in the way I presented and discussed the first and second research questions. Therefore, in both the findings and discussion chapters of this research, I presented the data comparatively to highlight the similarities and differences expressed by the participants, focusing on their individual rationales and experiences while also considering the specific country of study.

Findings for Research Question 1

The first research question explored the factors that attract international graduate students to the United States or Canada. The goal was to understand the participants' rationales for choosing their study destinations and determine whether they were similar or different based on the country of study. After the analysis, the following factors were found to attract participants to Canada and the United States:

1- Academic considerations,

2- Language and culture,

3- Financial concerns,

4- Post-study employment and immigration policies, including post-study work programs,

5- Social influences, and finally,

6- Students' perception of a country and society.

Some of these factors were sometimes more significant in one country than another. Figure 1 illustrates the six factors attracting international graduate students to the United States, while Figure 2 displays the ones drawing students to Canada. Each figure organizes the factors by their prevalence for each destination.

Figure 1

Factors *Attracting Participants to the* United States *in Order of Prevalence*

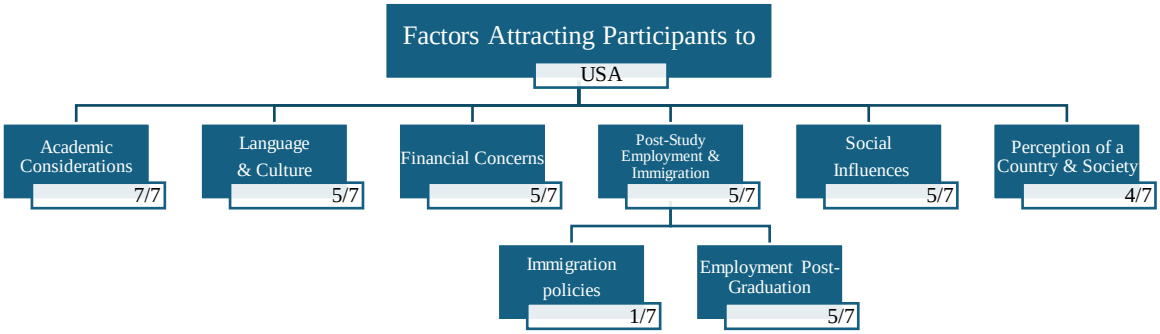
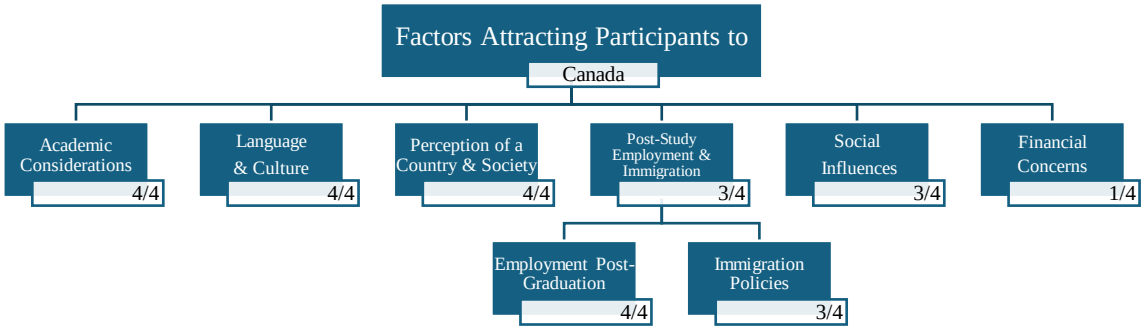


Figure 2

Factors Attracting Participants to Canada in Order of Prevalence



Academic Considerations

The international graduate students who participated in this research chose their study destinations based on several academic factors, including the limited study options available in their home countries and the range and accessibility of educational opportunities in the United States and Canada.

Limited Study Options at Home

Unlike the United States and Canada, where students have numerous majors and academic options to pursue, many countries still lack the desired graduate-level majors. Consequently, for some participants, studying at home was not feasible, making North America an appealing alternative.

When asked about their reasons for studying in the United States, three students (Maria, Samba, and Sarah) responded that they could not find master's programs in translation, engineering, and analytics (respectively) in their home countries. Maria reported:

> Well, I don't know that there is actually a master's specifically for translation in my country, because that industry is not that big. We don't actually, we just have linguistics, let's say, and then we don't have a program specialized in translation and interpretation. So that's why I also decided to go for it because I am interested in this industry.

Similarly, when asked why she chose Canada, Anita explained that she had left her home country, India, because no local university offered a program in her desired field. She remarked that her area of study was not even recognized as a major. Although people work in this field, it is not seen as a profession that requires formal education and a degree.

In addition to the unavailability of programs, some participants faced barriers hindering their access to existing local programs. For example, rigid academic tracking limits graduate

options and career paths in China and Brazil. Ming explained that in China, students are assigned to specific academic tracks. Students' focus during high school and undergraduate studies determines which graduate programs they can apply for. Consequently, she could not major in computer science after completing her undergraduate degree in a different field.

> So, first, I never thought I could learn computer science because it's impossible in China. It's hard to explain. In my high school, we need to decide the stream. So, for me, I choose, I don't know how to explain it. So, if my choice is something like accounting, law, or communication, and then the other part is engineering, computer science, or something, they are two totally different tracks. So, if I choose one track, I couldn't apply to any science-related major in college, yeah. So, in China, this is impossible, and well, I remember when I decided to come to the U.S., I told my family: "I want to go to the U.S. to study computer science". Most of my family thought I was crazy. (laughter) Yeah, so if I had never heard about this, if I had never searched for something on the internet, I would never know there were other ways I could choose.

Echoing a similar sentiment, Gabriella from Brazil shared that she faced career limitations imposed by her undergraduate degree, which pushed her to consider study options in Canada.

The flexibility and transparency of admission requirements also attracted graduate students to the United States and Canada. For example, Emma chose the United States due to the challenges of securing a PhD spot in China, which, according to her, involved extensive networking and potential bribery. Reluctant to engage in such practices, she enrolled in a program in the United States. Distance within a country can also challenge access to available programs at home. To illustrate, even though Priya could study her desired major in India, she

considered the distance and cost of moving to a different state in such a large country. With her sister already in the United States, she opted to study there instead.

The participants revealed that their struggles to find suitable programs in their home countries guided their decision to study abroad. Some reported that their majors did not exist at home, while others encountered barriers limiting their access to the available options. Given the availability and variety of academic programs abroad, the participants consequently looked for alternatives in the United States and Canada.

Program Availability, Quality, and Faculty Expertise in the Study Destination

In contrast to the limited study options in their home countries, the United States and Canada offered these participants ample academic choices and a perceived better quality of education. After completing his master's in the United States, John considered moving to Canada for his PhD but did not pursue the idea since he viewed both countries as having comparable educational quality: "I didn't want to move and start all over again. But I would say, in terms of quality, you kind of get the same quality of education". The analysis did not reveal any differences in academic factors attracting international graduate students to one country or the other.

When selecting a study destination, students assessed quality by examining program and institutional rankings, course content, technology use, and the integration of theory and practice in the learning experiences. Priya and Samba, for instance, contrasted the application-based teaching approach in the United States with the theory-driven approach in their home countries. Anita, Gabriella, and Sophia viewed their programs as among the top ones in Canada, which influenced their choice of institution. Anita stated: "I was focusing on this specific program. This

school was number one in Canada". Gabriella went beyond program rankings to contact alumni on LinkedIn to inquire about her program quality before making her final choice.

Additionally, the desire to work with specific faculty members who are experts in their fields guided the decisions of these international graduate students, especially at the PhD level. Emma chose to study in the United States under a particular advisor: "Yeah, I mean, my advisor, she's specialized in China Education, that is another factor because I'm a Chinese. I can do China Education as my research interest, you know, I have more advantages compared with other students".

Fei followed a faculty member from the United States to Canada due to their shared research interests.

> I happened to know a faculty at Northfield University [pseudonym], who was a new faculty at that time, but I took her class while she was at Metropolis University [pseudonym] in the U.S., so she was a visiting professor. I took her class, and she moved to Northfield for a tenure-track job. So, I found that we have a lot of research interests in common, so I also applied for the program.

Samba and John contacted faculty members they wanted to work with before applying to their programs in the United States. While John pursued a PhD, Samba, a master's student, struggled to earn a specific engineering degree in his home country. He considered the quality of his program to be one of the most important factors influencing his decision to study in the United States. After identifying an expert faculty member, Samba applied to that institution to work with them.

The participants were equally drawn to the United States and Canada because of the quality and variety of academic programs in both destinations. The opportunity to work with

expert faculty members was an important factor for students, supporting the idea that good institutions and programs, as well as experts and researchers in specific fields, contribute to attracting international graduate students to a specific country. No differences were observed in the academic factors driving participants to the United States versus Canada.

Language and Culture

Language and culture emerged as significant factors in the decision-making process of interviewees to study in Canada and the United States. Both countries offer education primarily in English, making them equally attractive to the study participants, who aimed to enhance their language skills, avoid language barriers in non-English-speaking destinations, and benefit from the prestige of a degree from an English-speaking country. Although Canada is a bilingual nation, none of the participants were pursuing degrees in French.

The respondents emphasized the critical role of the English language in their decision to study in these two destinations. Five of the seven U.S. participants came from non-English speaking countries, but three majored in English language studies at the undergraduate level. Samba and Priya, from countries where English is an official language but not the mother tongue, had completed their entire education in English. This background made the United States an attractive destination for their graduate studies, ensuring a smooth academic transition. Samba had considered institutions in Sweden but ultimately chose the United States to avoid language barriers. He recounted:

> I had a professor back in my undergrad[uate]. He's from, like, a university in Sweden. I had to do a little bit of research about that university. So, after searching and knowing that if I went there, I would struggle way more than if I come here [in the United States]. I mean, they don't take all their courses in English only. So, language barrier will be

> there. So, I was putting all that into consideration. If I go there, can I learn this language pretty quickly and just, I put all that stuff into consideration, and I was like, it'll be better if I come here. I don't need to go back to learn the language, just go straight on and do my program.

Similar to Samba, Priya was attracted to the education system in South Korea because it resembled the system in India. However, after learning on the Internet that courses are taught in Korean rather than English, she considered potential language barriers and decided to come to the United States.

As a non-native speaker, Maria sought linguistic and cultural immersion to advance her career as a professional translator. The United States was a perfect destination for achieving such goals. For Emma, a degree from an English-speaking country was more prestigious and valuable than one from a non-English-speaking country, as it offered her an international platform for research and publication, given her interest in academia.

> Yeah, as I mentioned, I majored in foreign languages, so getting a degree in an English-speaking country would be more valuable than a degree from my home country. And also, a degree in a U.S. university can connect me with more international scholars. As I said, I followed my advisor, and she introduced me to other scholars. They are either Chinese or American university professors. I can go to international conferences, and I have all my coursework and the research and publications in English that are targeted toward more like an international audience. So, that gave me an international platform. If I got a degree in my home country, I think that would be more constrained.

In Canada, two participants came from English-speaking countries and two from non-English-speaking nations. Fei, from China, had previously studied in the United States and did

not see potential language barriers when transitioning to Canada, given the common medium of instruction between the two countries. Similarly, Sophia, a native English speaker, never perceived language barriers as an issue when she moved to Canada. Gabriela from Brazil was initially concerned about studying in English, as most of her schooling was completed in Portuguese. Despite these worries, she focused solely on Canada as her destination. Anita from India considered German-speaking countries in Europe that offer courses in English because she had learned the language while previously studying there and could navigate the country without facing language barriers. Her choice suggests that while Anita did not choose Canada solely for language reasons, language factors significantly influenced her decision about where to study.

The students were equally drawn to the United States and Canada due to their ability to complete their degrees in English. The analysis revealed that participants from English-speaking nations and those who completed their previous education using English as the medium of instruction tended to choose Canada and the United States for their graduate studies. The language factor was crucial in their decision-making processes, as these students preferred English-speaking countries over non-English-speaking alternatives.

Financial Concerns

Participants in both countries agreed that studying in the United States and Canada is expensive, particularly since institutions charge higher tuition fees to international students compared to their domestic peers. As Sophia noted, in Canada: “It’s really expensive as an international student”. In addition to tuition fees, students encounter a high cost of living in both nations. Thus, the cost of education abroad and how to cover such expenses influenced their choice of study destinations. While most students did not perceive a difference in cost between

Canada and the United States, Priya viewed a U.S. education as more affordable than studying elsewhere. When asked about the factors pulling her to her host country, she replied:

> When it comes to the financial situation, it was easy to come to the U.S. than to any other country. It was kind of, I won't say it's kind of cheap, but it's not that expensive that I can't afford it out of my pocket. So, the finances played a huge role. Maybe I wouldn't even think about going to Australia or some other country because the cost of living there is much more expensive than any other country. Even in Canada, it's kind of really expensive, I kind of thought, the U.S. was kind of in my budget. So that's the reason I chose the U.S. more than any of the countries that I wanted to go to.

While the participants considered the cost of their education abroad when deciding where to study, a notable difference appeared in how they paid for their education in these two destinations. Most U.S. participants were funded through graduate assistantships offered by their institutions, but interviewees in Canada primarily used personal funds to pay for their education. The availability of graduate assistantships was a crucial driver to U.S. higher education institutions. Four of the seven U.S. participants obtained graduate assistantships. Emma, a Chinese student, emphasized the important role of institutional funding:

> I got the graduate assistantship. So, I've been a research assistant in that way that can waive my tuition and offer me a monthly stipend to help with living costs here. I think that's very important. So, for the past six years, I've been either a research assistant or a teaching assistant, and I got a stipend as a graduate assistant. So that covered my tuition and living expenses. Yeah, so that is why even though American universities are expensive, the scholarship is important.

Echoing a similar view of funding as a drawing factor to U.S. institutions, Sarah, who obtained a scholarship to complete her master's, added: "I chose Sunrise University [pseudonym] because of the financial reasons. It offered me a greater scholarship". Even Maria and Priya, who initially paid for their education using personal funds and family support, applied for funding once in the country. Unlike Priya, Maria successfully received a graduate assistantship for the second year of her master's program. Ming was the only student in the United States who declined funding offers from three different institutions so that she could study in the same state where her boyfriend lived and worked. She was also attracted by the quality of the program offered by her chosen institution.

In Canada, participants covered the cost of their education with little to no reliance on university funding. Most interviewees could not secure scholarships and assistantships despite their interest and need for institutional financial support. Of the four students interviewed in Canada, only Fei, a PhD student, received a graduate assistantship. After completing a master's in the United States, she left to enroll in Canada mainly because her institution funded her for the entire program. In contrast, the three U.S. institutions that accepted her application provided financial assistance for just the first year, with no guarantee for the following years. The remaining participants completed master's programs but did not secure funding. They relied on personal loans, savings, and family support to pay for their Canadian education, as exemplified by Gabriella's statement:

> I did have savings like all my life. And I spent all of it paying for my studies here. Yeah, like literally all of it. And also, I had to borrow a part of it from my mom, too. Yeah, so that was a tricky part. I did, like, it's really expensive for international students. And I tried, looking at loans and stuff like this, but because my mom had some money, sort of. I

> figured it was easier for me to just get it from my mom and pay her later than get a student loan or have a debt.

As Gabriella's quote illustrates, the high cost of education and living in Canada was a concern for the interviewees. Furthermore, they had limited opportunities to obtain scholarships or assistantships. Gabriella applied for a scholarship intended to assist students with financial needs, but the amount she received was far from sufficient to cover her basic expenses. Since three of the four participants faced a lack of funding opportunities in Canada, they prioritized other cost-related factors. For example, students who brought their families as dependents mentioned that the option of living in subsidized family housing offered by their institution significantly influenced their decision to move to Canada.

> The cost of living is very, very high. But again, that's why family housing helps because it's in the heart of the city, but it's subsidized housing. So, you know, if you can afford it, you have a good apartment that gives you enough space for your child and you at a relatively reasonable rate compared to other buildings that are around us. Just to give you an idea, the apartment I live in is about CAD 1,500 [per month], but the apartment right next to us is CAD 4,000 [equivalent to US$2,950] the same size. That's the difference, you know? (Anita)

According to Sophia, international students choose to study at her institution specifically for the support and the possibility of living in subsidized family housing. The high cost of living was a worrying factor. Even Fei, who received funding for her PhD, contacted the program coordinator to inquire about living costs in Canada before making her final decision.

Financial considerations played a significant role in the participants' decisions to study in the United States and Canada. While both countries have high costs of education and high cost of

living, the findings show differences in funding opportunities and reliance on personal finances. U.S. institutions attracted the respondents with graduate assistantships and scholarships. While in Canada, participants predominantly relied on personal funds, savings, and family support, with limited institutional funding options. However, living in subsidized family housing provided by their institutions became a factor to consider for participants with families. While students in Canada can be authorized to work off-campus during their studies to support themselves, those in the United States are often restricted to on-campus employment. These differences between the two countries may explain the reliance of U.S. participants on graduate assistantships and scholarships compared to their Canadian peers.

Post-Study Employment and Immigration Policies

Besides all these factors, the chances of finding employment after completing their studies, immigration policies in the study destination, and students' migration intentions impacted the selection of a host country. In Canada, three of the four participants mentioned they were motivated by the favorable immigration policies and appealing post-study work program that can lead to direct permanent residency and possible citizenship. They were also attracted to the job opportunities available after graduation. Gabriella, a Brazilian graduate in Canada, stated: "Yeah, that was one of the reasons why we [she and her partner] came. We wanted to continue here. And possibly, like, get a PR [Permanent Residency]. So yeah, like definitely, that was one of the reasons". Students were aware of the PGWPP. They considered it during their decision-making process, demonstrating the importance of immigration policies in general and post-study employment policies in attracting students to a country. Confirming students' desire to study and stay post-graduation as a guiding factor for selecting a study destination, Anita added:

> I was looking at Canada because Canada, firstly, Canada has a bit of an easier immigration policy compared to other countries. I also looked at Europe a lot, but, you know, Europe was, although I would have loved Europe, but again, you know, staying post the studies, there is a bit of challenge and uncertainty.

With such favorable post-study immigration and employment policies, Anita viewed studying in Canada as an opportunity to provide a better life for herself and her daughter:

> I think my personal reason, being a single parent, coming from a country that is more patriarchal, a bit more conservative, you know, staying there and still living that life, but I thought about it. My situation was not just for me, my daughter, also; while I can face the challenges, whatever might come, I didn't want my daughter to be subjected to that. So, coming here gave an opportunity for her to also widen her exposure. So, understanding that there are all sorts of family setups, people, identities that exist in the world, it's not very sort of boxed in, like back home. I think that was a really sort of the foundation and motivation for me to look outside and look somewhere, but also, at the same time, I wanted to make sure that my career aspirations and what I want to do for my future were also being taken care of, and that's why, thankfully, Canada sort of represented that for me.

In the same vein, Sophia highlighted Canada's employment and immigration policies as decisive factors for choosing to study in Canada:

> "I came here with the pretext that things would be easier. I read that Canada has better upward mobility, you know, easier upward mobility, and is welcoming. And I thought that I was gonna get the teaching job easily".

Canadian graduates commonly cited the country's favorable immigration policies as their most important reason for studying there. They emphasized Canada's PGWPP, which enables students to gain Canadian work experience and qualify for permanent residency. Fei, however, did not initially consider the country's immigration policies but recognized their importance upon discovering the opportunities for employment and immigration after graduation, particularly as a PhD holder.

Interestingly, unlike Canadian participants who viewed favorable immigration policies as a drawing factor, no participant mentioned immigration policies as a significant reason for studying in the United States. Only one student noted that she considered her desire to remain in the United States after graduation when selecting her study destination. While the broader immigration policies did not help pull the participants to the United States, the post-study work program did. Two interviewees highlighted the longer OPT duration available to STEM majors compared to non-STEM majors.

Despite noting a lack of consideration for U.S. immigration policies when selecting a country of study, these participants shared how they were drawn to the employment opportunities available after graduation. Six of the seven participants hoped to secure employer sponsorship for the H-1B visa, which would allow them to work longer in the United States and eventually transition to permanent residency. As Sarah put it:

> I have a lot of international friends, and we all share the same kind of mindset where it seems like, wherever you come from, if you choose to pursue your studies in the United States, you're doing it for a better future, obviously.

John added that the abundance of job opportunities and higher standard of living explain the preference of international students for the United States. Ming echoed these sentiments,

stating that she chose to study in the United States to stay and work in the tech industry, which, according to her, provides better salaries and improved work-life balance compared to China. Maria came to the United States due to limitations in the translation industry in her home country, aiming to enhance her employment prospects. Priya and Ming, concerned about gender-based discrimination at home, believed a U.S. degree would offer them better career opportunities, given the constraints on women's professional roles in their countries.

Most participants agreed that the career prospects after graduation attracted them to the United States. However, they voiced concerns about immigration policies and their impact on their post-study employment opportunities, particularly the transition from the OPT to a more permanent work visa like the H-1B. Even Emma, a PhD graduate already sponsored under the H-1B visa category, stated during our interview that she initially intended to study in the United States and return to China without any regard for immigration intentions or policies in her decision-making process. This may be related to students' awareness of the stricter U.S. immigration rules, including the requirement to demonstrate non-immigrant intent to obtain a student visa.

Sarah and Emma's experiences demonstrate that participants consider the duration of OPT and view the STEM OPT extension as an attractive pull factor for U.S. STEM programs. Since STEM majors are allowed to work under OPT for up to 36 months, while non-STEM majors are limited to 12 months, Sarah ensured that she enrolled in STEM fields to benefit from the OPT extension, hoping to enhance her chances of transitioning to an H-1B.

> Yeah, I was relying on it [the STEM-OPT extension]. I did major in STEM, maybe because of the extension of OPT with it. So even in undergrad, when I did my econ[omics] degree, I turned it into a STEM through my minor. So, even though I didn't,

> I wasn't like relying on applying for jobs right after my undergrad, so I still wanted to make sure that if an opportunity arises, I could tell the employer, "Oh, I have like three years", you know, in case of final sponsorship.

When she was nearing the completion of her PhD program, Emma faced employment uncertainty. She then applied to a master's program in a STEM field and started taking classes, hoping to benefit from a potential 36-month OPT experience.

This study examined the factors influencing participants' choices of study destination and found that immigration policies and post-study employment opportunities play a crucial role in their decisions to study in the United States and Canada. Canadian graduates mostly chose Canada due to its favorable immigration policies, particularly the PGWPP, which provides a clear path to permanent residency. In contrast, U.S. graduates were mainly drawn to the employment prospects after graduation but voiced concerns about restrictive immigration policies. Still, two participants in the United States, John and Sarah, had considered study options in Canada because of the perceived differences in employment and immigration, underscoring the significant influence of such policies on their decision-making processes.

Social Influences

Social influences also played a role in shaping the decisions to study in the United States and Canada. Interviewees who had family members already established in these destinations indicated that these social ties influenced their choices of host countries. For instance, Priya went to study in the United States. because her sister was already pursuing a degree there. She noted:

> It was kind of easy for me to come to the U.S. and move to the United States because I don't really have any other family or relatives in other states of India, but I do have family and friends here. So that's one of the reasons.

Similarly, Ming wanted to join her boyfriend, who had relocated from their country to the United States for work. In contrast, Sarah initially came to the United States not to pursue higher education but because her mother was enrolled in a PhD program. After completing high school, Sarah went on to earn her undergraduate degree and, subsequently, a master's degree even after her mother had already left the country.

Choosing a host destination due to existing connections was also common among participants in Canada:

> I chose Northfield because my sister is also doing a PhD at this university. So, I looked at all these options, and my school made sense. And I also, like I said, because of my sister, having already [some] sort of knowledge about the system, it helped me navigate a little bit better. (Anita)

For Anita, having a sister already studying in Canada was the deciding factor. As for Sophia, it was because her father lived there, and she did not have the opportunity to grow up close to him:

> I have a father and some distant family in Canada. So that's why we decided that maybe we could get PR [Permanent Residency] and dual citizenship in Canada. I'm trying to, you know, get closer to my dad. [My country] is getting worse, it seems like. So that's why I want to come to Northfield [pseudonym].

Gabriella did not have any family members in Canada. Her choice was motivated by her partner's decision to pursue a PhD in Canada, which assured them they would have a support system to rely on during their studies.

In addition to family ties, the participants made their decisions based on recommendations and referrals from personal connections knowledgeable about the study destination. To provide evidence for this point, Samba stated: "I already had a friend studying

here before coming, you know, who kinda like recommended a program for me, so I did a little bit of research myself, then I decided to apply for it". Similarly, although Priya had a sister in the United States, educational agents in India advised her to consider studying in the United States. They assisted her in selecting a program of study and an institution. Ming also learned about her desired program of study and institution through a friend living in the United States. Gabriella discussed the advice she received from contacting alumni of her program on LinkedIn to inquire about the program and the institution, further solidifying her choice of Canada as a study destination.

In a few instances, faculty members also played an influential role in attracting participants to their study destinations. The desire to work with a faculty member relocating to Canada from the United States inspired Fei to apply to a Canadian university after completing a U.S. master's degree. Emma believed that an informative interaction with a U.S. academic visiting her home country sparked her desire to pursue a PhD in the United States:

> I mentioned that [a] professor offered the teachers some training workshops at my university. He's from a U.S. university. He also gave me, like, an introduction and or taught me about the procedures, the application, and many other things about being a doctoral student in an American university. So yeah, that is why I feel the United States would be a good choice for me to continue my studies. And I think the professor explicitly told me how many years of coursework and then you become a doctoral candidate. I think that kind of information helped me make the decision.

International graduate students who contributed to this study indicated that social connections were influential in helping them choose a country of study. Existing family ties in

the chosen destination and personal recommendations factored into their decision-making process, guiding the students towards either the United States or Canada.

Perception of a Country and Society

Compared to interviewees in the United States, who did not elaborate on their perception of the host society, participants in Canada noted that their view of the country and its culture played a role in selecting a study destination. They highlighted several unique characteristics that positively impacted their experiences during and after their studies. They perceived Canada as a welcoming society that is open to immigrants and international students. Students who brought their families as dependents praised the support they received. They benefited from subsidized family housing and participated in extracurricular activities. Anita appreciated the diversity and progressive values that contrasted with the traditional and conservative values in her home country. She shared that her positive experience during a previous visit to her sister studying in Canada reinforced her decision:

> My sister is also doing a PhD from this university. So, the years when she was doing her classes, you know, the courses, we visited her. And I felt that this city was so cosmopolitan; you know, you see every nationality, every race, every gender, and every background. Everybody is living their life; you know, nobody is breathing in each other's. That freedom to breathe as a person, I felt it more over here than even back home, actually. So that sort of was like, okay, let's do this province.

Potential political instability, a lack of tolerance for diversity in her home country, and the positive values in Canada influenced Sophia's decision. She chose Canada because she wanted her daughter to grow up in a more welcoming and diverse environment:

> So, we also wanted to come to Canada because we valued some of the progress, you know, not really progressive, more progressive than [my country's] policies. And we wanted more diversity too, that wasn't just segregated but integrated.

Gabriella's quote highlights how her perception of Canada, its values as a society, and its good education and healthcare system shaped her decision to study there instead of going to the United States.

> I think like, for me, it was mostly, I think the culture and like some principles that the country has, for me, the U.S. is not really what I envisioned for myself. Well, if I work in public health, we start there; there's no public health in the U.S.; it's not free like it is in Brazil, for example. And I think that's what brought me to Canada a little bit more, like the quality or the assumed quality of life and the quality of education and health care.

In contrast, U.S. participants did not explicitly share their views on the American society or culture. However, living in a safe and welcoming community was important to Emma, who considered her family's well-being when deciding to study in the United States. Emma selected her institution because a colleague, who had previously been a visiting scholar at Eastern State University [pseudonym] for one year, recommended it to her, emphasizing that it was in a small, safe, and welcoming city.

In addition to safety, two participants noted that being familiar with a location helped retain them for graduate school, especially after completing their previous education in the country. Sarah, who initially came with her mother, who was pursuing a PhD, said about her decision to stay on: "I already knew the place [the United States], the location was familiar. So, it was easy". John's familiarity with Eastern State and his positive experience during his master's program motivated him to apply for a PhD. One student considered the favorable weather in the

host state important, and two others viewed studying in the United States as a good opportunity to travel and discover the country.

When choosing to study abroad, participants in this study reiterated that they considered more than just academic factors. Canada's reputation as a welcoming society appealed to the four graduate students interviewed. Conversely, the U.S. participants did not share their thoughts on their host society. Except for Maria, who wanted to improve her understanding of the American culture due to her focus on translation studies, the few students who mentioned their perception of the United States were more concerned about their safety, desire for discovery, travel opportunities, and the local weather.

Findings for Research Question 2

The second research question explored the participants' perceptions of their experiences navigating the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) in Canada and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States. In this section, I provide an overview of the differences between the programs before sharing the interviewees' employment experiences in their respective study destinations.

Overview of Program Differences

The PGWPP in Canada and the OPT in the United States allow international students to gain work experience post-graduation. However, they differ significantly in various aspects. Table 4 provides an overview of both programs and highlights their differences.

In Canada, international students have up to 180 days upon completing their studies to apply for a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP), processed by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, 2006). In contrast, international students in the United States can submit their OPT application 90 days before the end of their academic program and no later than

60 days post-completion (USCIS, 2025). OPT applications are processed by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. Both programs offer online and mail application options. While international students can submit their applications from inside or outside Canada (IRCC, 2006), OPT applications can only be submitted within the United States. This entails that graduates in Canada can leave the country and come back to explore career options for at least six months upon program completion, which graduates in the United States cannot do.

Under the PGWPP, international students at the graduate level can receive a work authorization of up to three years, irrespective of their majors (IRCC, 2006). The OPT lasts 12 months for all majors, with a possible 24-month extension for eligible STEM majors (USCIS, 2025). The PGWPP application fees are CAD 255 (IRCC, 2006). However, students also reported biometrics fees of CAD 85 upon approval. In contrast, at the time I was interviewing for this study, the OPT application fees were $410 for regular processing, with an expedited option for an additional $1,500. These fees have since increased to $470 and $1,685 (USCIS, 2023). While the processing time for the PGWPP can range from a few weeks to a few months, depending on factors such as applying from within or outside Canada and the country of application (IRCC, 2023), the OPT takes three to five months for regular processing and up to 30 business days for premium processing (USCIS, 2024).

Neither the PGWPP nor the OPT requires a job offer before application. Under the PGWPP, employment does not need to be related to the field of study, and students can start working while their application is being processed. Conversely, the OPT requires employment to be directly related to the field of study, and students can only begin working after obtaining approval from USCIS and receiving their Employment Authorization Document (EAD).

The PGWPP does not impose a deadline for starting employment or restrict the number of days a student can be unemployed. On the other hand, the OPT program mandates that students find employment within 90 days of the approved start date, limiting the duration of unemployment while on OPT to 90 days (USCIS, 2025).

Whether they have secured a job offer or not, international students in the United States applying for OPT must select an official date when they should start employment. This date marks the beginning of their OPT program and initiates a 12-month countdown, after which their initial work authorization expires. In Canada, the PGWPP begins upon approval by IRCC without requiring students to select a specific start date.

To be eligible for the PGWPP, students in Canada must have completed a full-time program of at least eight months at a Designated Learning Institution [DLI] (IRCC, 2006). OPT eligibility requires completing full-time study at an institution approved by the U.S. government (USCIS, 2025).

The PGWPP is a one-time eligibility permit. Students can only use it once during their educational journey in Canada, but it may allow spouses or partners to obtain a work permit. On the other hand, international students in the United States can apply for the OPT after completing each degree level (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025), but it does not provide work permit eligibility for spouses or partners. While the work experience gained under the work permit makes students eligible for permanent residency in Canada (IRCC, 2024b), in the United States, the OPT does not lead to permanent residency.

Table 4

Overview of the Differences between the PGWPP and the OPT

	PGWPP (Canada)	Post-Completion OPT (USA)
Application deadline	Within 180 days of program completion	90 days before program completion and no later than 60 days after
Processing agency	Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)
Application process	Online Mail option available	Online Mail option available
Application	Inside and outside Canada	Inside the United States only
Program duration	Up to 3 years for master's and PhD holders in all fields as of February 15, 2024	12 months for all majors 24 months extension available for eligible STEM majors
Application fees	CAD 255 total Work permit fee = CAD 155 Open work permit fee = CAD 100	$410 Regular OPT Application Additional $1,500 for premium processing
Processing time	A few weeks to a few months	Approximately 3 to 5 months for regular applications Approximately 30 business Days for Expedited processing
Job offer	Not required for application	Not required for application
Employment	Not restricted to the field of study	Directly related to the field of study
Work authorization while processing	Students may start employment while IRCC is processing their applications.	Students cannot begin employment before USCIS approves and mails the work authorization.
Deadline to start employment	No deadline. Employment begins when students secure position	No later than 90 from the approved OPT start date or leave the United States
Unemployment days	No limit	No more than 90 days of unemployment during the 12 months of OPT authorization
Program eligibility	Completion of a full-time program of at least 8 months at a Designated Learning Institutions	Completion of a full-time study in a SEVIS approved higher education institutions
Single vs multiple program use	One-time eligibility regardless of the number of degrees pursued.	OPT eligibility after completing each degree level
Spouse / partner employment eligibility	May be eligible for a work permit	Not eligible for the work permit
Transition to permanent residency	Work experience under the PGWPP makes students eligible for permanent residency	Work experience under the OPT does not qualify for permanent residency

Experiences Navigating the OPT and the PGWPP

I focused on three stages to compare the participants' experiences navigating the PGWPP in Canada and the OPT in the United States. In the first stage, the students secured their work authorizations. The comparison centered around the application process and the implications of the programs' ease or complexity for the students' transition to the workforce.

In the second stage, the respondents negotiated employment. They discussed the types of jobs obtained, their job-hunting strategies, and the challenges limiting their chances of securing work in their host countries. It is important to note that engaging in job searching does not necessarily begin after obtaining work authorization, as students who are pressed for time often start looking for positions long before graduation.

The final phase focused on the participants' plans and options after the OPT and PGWPP, considering the requirements of each program and their implications for the students' lives and careers.

Stage 1: Securing Work Authorization

In stage one, the participants aimed to secure a work permit. A few prevalent themes were time constraints, financial challenges, and the support and guidance provided by the students' institutions and their peers during the application process. This initial stage of the post-study work program involved graduating and obtaining work authorization to begin employment in the host countries.

In the United States, the OPT application process was described as straightforward. However, the interviewees noted that the numerous requirements and restrictions created challenges and uncertainty even though they were all approved for the OPT program. The majority of participants in Canada also found the application process easy to navigate and

reported fewer program requirements and restrictions, leading to less uncertainty and fewer challenges. Unfortunately, one participant was denied the work permit because she took a year-long maternity leave in addition to paperwork issues, unaware of the requirement to change her study permit to a visitor permit.

In this early stage of the post-study work experience, two main challenges emerged: negotiating time and finances. While time was a more pressing issue for U.S. participants, finances were a concern in both countries. Students also acknowledged the support and guidance they received from their institutions and peers.

U.S. Time Constraint vs. Canadian Flexible Deadlines. The most significant difference in the experiences of participants navigating the OPT and those navigating the PGWPP was their challenges with the time allotted to transition from students to employees in their respective study destinations. The tight and strict deadlines in the United States contrasted with the forgiving program requirements in Canada.

U.S. Time Constraints. In the United States, participants described the process they went through to secure their work authorizations. Applying to the program required submitting thoroughly proofread paperwork. Both Samba and Ming expressed their fear of making any mistake on the application form, which could lead to rejection. However, what challenged the students most was navigating the OPT within the program's stipulated deadline. The following program restrictions were frequently highlighted during the interviews, illustrating the challenges participants encountered while trying to adhere to OPT regulations (USCIS, 2025):

- A mandatory choice of an OPT start date that falls within 60 days of academic program completion, resulting in the work authorization being effective from this chosen date.

- A prohibition on beginning employment before the chosen start date and before program approval and receipt of the employment authorization document (EAD), and,
- A requirement to find and begin employment in the field of study within 90 days of approval, as unemployment for more than 90 days is not allowed under OPT.

The combination of these requirements and the noted processing delays made participants face significant time constraints. They had 90 days from their chosen employment start date to secure and begin working or risk losing their OPT status. Priya described the challenges of adhering to the program's deadline as follows:

> I applied [for OPT] before graduation because, being an international student, since the moment you graduate, your clock starts ticking. You get 90 days to get a job right after graduation, and even if I do get a job, I need to have my permission from […] the government to work. So, in order to save time. I kind of applied 30 to 90 days before my graduation. Yeah. It was kind of scary because I couldn't really manage it. That's the reason why I didn't really enjoy any of last semester. It was my final semester, and I had to worry about this timeline. And then, when I graduated, I needed to make sure I had a job within 90 days.

Priya's use of the "ticking clock" analogy describes the pressure and urgency she felt as she navigated the initial stage of the OPT.

Given the connection between the OPT start date and the 90-day unemployment limit, the challenge lies in strategically selecting the date. Maria, for instance, was caught between the risks of choosing an early versus a late start date:

> I think that the most frustrating part was not knowing the [start] date. I even had to schedule an appointment with an international student and scholar advisor, and in the

> appointment, the advisor was like: “Why is this appointment?” I was like, please tell me which date I should choose.

Maria’s question to the international student advisor exemplifies the dilemma of selecting an employment start date without a job offer. Opting for an early start date could enable her to begin working upon securing a position. However, any delay in finding a job would begin the countdown of 90 days of unemployment, further diminishing the time remaining on the initial 12 months of OPT authorization.

> I didn’t want to lose days because that’s also what you hear a lot when you are about to graduate or applying for OPT. When you ask for other people’s advice, people that are already with OPT, they come and say, “Oh, no, actually, I lost these many days. And I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have done it”, and then you’re like kind of scared, you know, and also like say, okay, I should think well, yeah. (Maria)

Conversely, choosing a later start date ensures that the 90-day countdown does not begin immediately upon graduation, allowing more time to secure employment. However, the drawback is that students cannot accept job offers requiring them to start immediately because they cannot work before their OPT-approved start date. They must wait to receive their Employment Authorization Document, as mandated by the program. Faced with this dilemma, Sarah missed an employment opportunity. After submitting her OPT application, USCIS took five months to process it. By the time an employer was willing to hire her, Sarah did not have her work authorization.

> All you have to do is wait for the government to issue your OPT, which was an issue for me because there was almost an offer at the table, and all I had to do was, you know, wait for my OPT, like the EAD card [Employment Authorization Document], to come in the

> mail. But because it took so long to come in the mail and there was no way for me to track it, they [the company] decided to go with some other candidate who was a U.S. citizen.

Two more participants, Ming and Priya, faced challenges regarding their employment start dates and the restriction on beginning work before receiving approval. They addressed this issue in different ways. Ming received a job offer before graduation, which clarified when her company expected her to start. Realizing she could not afford to wait months for her work authorization, she submitted a premium OPT application that could be processed much faster, eliminating the need for a contract renegotiation.

> There is a normal standard process, but if you want to get the results quickly, you need to pay (laughter) $1,500 to get the EAD card quickly. So, because I plan to start work on the first day of January of next year, I think maybe I must. I'm not very happy to pay for it (laughter), but I must. I also searched for some information on the internet, and I think usually they [USCIS] need one to three months to finish the process. And that's a very long time. And I think most of the students, they may pay for it. It's expensive, but sometimes you have to because we can't work until we get the OPT. So, I already told my employer and my company. I already confirmed the day that I start to work. If I can't receive the EAD card before that day, which means I may negotiate the start date with the company again. I think it's, it has some risks, right?

Like Ming, Priya also received a job offer with a specific start date. However, the offer came after she submitted her OPT application. Priya's only option was then to renegotiate her contract to avoid working before the selected start date of her OPT program:

> Even though I got my offer letter in December, I could not have immediately started because my OPT period starts on January 16. So that's when I asked the company to postpone my start date, and thankfully, they agreed to that.

Whether they chose an early or late start date, students shared their struggle with the time allotted to secure employment, considering the different OPT requirements they needed to follow. Reconciling their OPT start date, their employers' desired start date, the prohibition to begin employment before receiving their work authorization, and the risk of accumulating 90 days of unemployment upon OPT approval significantly influenced every decision that participants made during the initial stage of the OPT experience. Even Maria, whose work authorization was lost while being delivered, noted that she was more concerned about time rather than the money spent to reapply for the OPT program:

> It's not just about the money that you're paying. It is about the time. I think that's the most critical. You can pay, okay, you can make the payment. You cannot just wait another three months. Most often, your company is asking you for this document, so that's kind of critical.

Additionally, most participants noted the lengthy processing time, particularly when USCIS failed to approve or send the work authorization weeks or months after the applications were submitted. This time pressure intensified as students could not begin employment before receiving approval. Sarah explained:

> So, I applied in March, knowing that I would graduate in May, which would allow me with a two-month period before graduation, but I got the actual card in, like, mid-July. But if you were to apply just a few weeks prior, the time was exponentially shorter for you to get the OPT. But a lot of the people who didn't have a job before did apply in

> March, which is what I did as well, and I think because of that, there was a lot of traffic with documents and processing, so it got stuck there.

Even as he neared the end of his initial 12 months of authorized employment under the OPT program, Samba, a STEM student eligible for a 24-month extension, felt under time pressure after submitting his application. He was concerned about potential processing delays:

> So, I mean, it's a kind of a daunting process, too, cause right now, I am kind of worried a little bit whether the OPT will get approved in time because I don't want my OPT to get approved after December because the final day in December is the end of my work authorization. The company will request me to submit another work authorization because that one has expired. So, I don't want any delay in that. So, it gets me a little bit worried whether that will come in time. The first one, after I applied, it didn't take me two months, and I got it. Yeah, so hopefully, this one, too, transitions smoothly.

Samba added that if his initial work authorization were to expire, it could lead to losing his job, as the company would require him to present his renewed work authorization.

USCIS, not higher education institutions, is responsible for processing and delivering OPT work authorizations. Despite lengthy processing delays, students have no option but to wait. Three months after applying for the OPT, Maria contacted the international office at her institution, hoping they could expedite the process because she had a potential job offer. She learned that institutions could not do anything about the delay and that everything depended on how many applications USCIS received.

Flexible Deadlines in Canada. While the analysis revealed that a combination of OPT requirements and noted processing delays put U.S. participants under time pressure during the initial stage of their PSWP experiences, graduates in Canada navigating the PGWPP did not

experience the urgency that their peers in the United States felt to secure employment or leave their host destination. With fewer program requirements, participants in Canada obtained their work authorization without worrying about any deadlines. Despite having 180 days post-degree completion to apply for the PGWPP, all four interviewees promptly submitted their applications upon receiving their confirmation of program completion. They had no requirement to select a start date for a post-study work program since the work authorization begins when IRCC approves it. Despite noting some processing delays, participants' ability to start employment or remain in Canada was not impacted.

> The very good thing about Canada and Canadian immigration status is that they already informed us that if you have applied for PGWP and it's in process, you don't have to worry. You don't have to leave the country. Nobody is gonna worry you or kick you out. I was like, okay. I don't have to worry about it because a lot of times people are worried you have to exit the country, so that was a bit relieving at that time (Anita).

The program allows students to begin employment upon submitting their applications. All participants interviewed were eligible to work off-campus during their studies. Consequently, they did not need to wait for IRCC approval upon applying for the work permit. Therefore, when Gabriella's part-time employer extended her contract after graduation, she seamlessly transitioned to full-time employment. However, due to technical difficulties with the IRCC website, she paused employment for a week to ensure the agency had received her mailed application. When the confirmation arrived, Gabriella transitioned to post-study employment.

Upon applying for the work permit, the participants were automatically authorized to extend their stay in Canada unless the application was rejected. This was the case for Sophia, whose application was denied due to an expired passport and study permit before she could

apply for the work permit. In addition, she took an extended maternity leave during her studies without knowing the requirement to convert her study permit to a visitor permit. In contrast, despite Anita's struggle to secure post-study employment, she could stay in Canada for several months until landing a full-time job in her desired field.

The PGWPP differed in duration from the OPT. Unlike the 12-month OPT, which can be extended for specific STEM majors for 24 months, participants observed that the program allowed them to acquire work experience in Canada for three years, irrespective of their fields of study and degree levels. Initially, students used to receive a permit valid for the same duration as their period of study. Graduates could receive one to two years for a master's degree and three years upon completing a PhD. A recent policy change has allowed all graduate students to be eligible for a three-year work permit (IRCC, 2024a). Fei, a PhD graduate, said: "In Canada, for my degree, I would get a three-year work permit. Yeah, because the length of the work permit depends on the length of the program. For my program, it is three years". However, despite earning a master's degree, Anita also received a three-year work authorization. She noted: "Yeah, I got my post-graduation permit, that gave me three years of work permit".

Comparing participants' experiences in Canada and the United States during the first stage of their post-study work programs, the study found a notable difference in how interviewees perceived the time allotted to secure work authorization and transition to post-study employment in their host destinations. Since the two programs differed in requirements, they affected the participants' experiences differently. U.S. interviewees felt under constant time pressure during the initial stage of their OPT experiences. They also struggled to avoid violating their program rules. In contrast, Canadian participants with fewer program requirements did not mention any urgency to secure employment or leave their study destination.

Financial Challenges. Unlike time pressure, a notable challenge for U.S. participants rather than their Canadian counterparts, interviewees in both destinations faced financial strains. Some encountered these challenges due to employment gaps, while others struggled with the costs of securing their work authorizations.

Employment Gap. Students in the United States who did not have job offers by graduation experienced an employment gap due to various program restrictions. The F-1 student visa limits employment to on-campus jobs unless otherwise authorized. Most participants relied on graduate assistantships and scholarships to fund their studies, but graduation meant losing their only source of income. Additionally, the OPT prohibits employment before approval. Coupled with noted processing delays, students' inability to work was prolonged. After obtaining work authorization, those still struggling to find employment faced severe financial challenges. For instance, when Samba started accruing too many unemployment days due to his inability to find a job, he negotiated an unpaid volunteer position, which allowed him to remain in the United States but put him under serious financial strain:

> I didn't want to waste time, so there was a professor in the department who was doing a work on [a project]. So, I decided to volunteer to work for that professor because OPT has a requirement that within 60 days, you need to get a job. It doesn't matter whether the job is a paid job or voluntary job; you need to get something for your status, you know, to be valid here. So, I had to find a way to get something. So, I decided to talk to the professor, and, you know, he was like, yeah, you can start anytime you want. So, I started working for that professor for like five months, from January to May. I was doing a voluntary job, like no money coming in. (Laughter) So yeah, that was, that was like the

> toughest time I've experienced here. It was even worse than when I first came and was transitioning, yeah, so that was a little bit crazy.

Similarly, Sarah used volunteering at her university to maintain her F-1 visa when she could not find a paid job and was closing in on the 90 days of unemployment permitted under the OPT program. During that time, she was financially challenged:

> You have 90 days from your graduation date to find a job or to file something. For now, for me, I'm like keeping my status by working as a volunteer, basically. But of course, since I've already paid for the OPT, I don't want to just waste it on voluntary work. I do want to get a specialized job. So, it's not, you know, it's not something that is long-term or that actually sustains me since it doesn't pay me. I think that it's, like, financially and mentally, kind of a drain.

Two participants in Canada who did not transition to employment immediately after graduation also faced financial challenges. Sophia's work permit application was rejected. Despite being allowed to work in Canada after applying for the PGWPP, students must cease employment if their application is denied, plunging Sophia and her family into financial difficulties. Sophia had to leave the subsidized family housing as she was no longer a student. While she hired an immigration attorney to solve the issue, her husband could not work or attend school, making the situation difficult for them and their two children.

> Yeah, a huge difficulty! Because I thought that we were gonna get PR [permanent residency] faster than we [thought], you know, because he [Sophia's husband] wanted to go back to school. But he can't. We can't afford it. So, it's been, it's been delayed because we can't afford to go at an international rate. So, you see, like, everything has

> been delayed because of it. So, he [the husband], he hasn't been doing well because he can't do what he wants.

On the other hand, Anita struggled to find employment for nearly a year. At one point, she faced "dwindling finances" and the threat of having to move out of her subsidized family apartment. Fortunately, her admission to a PhD program allowed her to keep the apartment.

The employment gap was not simply a lack of income. For two students in Canada, not finding a job right away led to housing problems. For one of them, plans of family members were put on hold. In the United States, taking unpaid volunteer positions to avoid cumulating 90 days of unemployment financially affected two participants. Only three of the seven U.S. interviewees received a job offer before graduation, leaving four still hunting for employment post-graduation. In total, the employment gap affected six of the 11 participants who contributed to this study.

Program Cost. In both countries, students pay application fees to obtain their work authorizations. The interviewees in Canada reported a cost of CAD 255 for the PGWPP. Some participants noted that they were required to pay biometrics fees only after program approval. In the United States, students have two options for applying for the OPT. Six participants paid a regular application fee of $410, which took three to five months to process. One interviewee opted for an expedited filing option and paid $1,500 in addition to the filing fees. The premium option allows students to benefit from a much shorter processing time of 30 business days (USCIS, 2024a). Ming was the only participant who chose the expedited option because she had a job lined up soon after graduation and was afraid of missing the opportunity if she couldn't start working before receiving OPT approval.

While no students in Canada complained about the cost associated with their work authorization, U.S. respondents found the amount challenging. They mostly relied on graduate assistantships and scholarships and thought they were not earning enough to support themselves and save for such added expenses.

> I think it was $410 or something like that. And you could pay like over $1,000 to expedite it. But no one special person is like rich enough to do that for no reason. It's a lot for the fact that I couldn't even track or estimate when I would get it because the estimation that they had on the website wasn't accurate for me at least. But then it's like you don't really have a choice, so I can't complain about it. So, no, it is what it is. I knew the amount, so I said that's fine. But you know, if you want to save for it or say if you are working to sort of temporary job and you can't save, I can only imagine, like, how tough it can be. (Sarah)

Priya, a self-funded student, discussed the financial burden on her parents, who paid her OPT application fees, in addition to the transfer and exchange fees between India and the United States:

> My parents paid for everything, but it is kind of hard to ask for everything from your parents because you really don't have any stable source of income. And the part-time work didn't pay much to make any payment easy. So, yeah, it was tough, I would say, but not for me. But for my parents, it was really tough because the currency changes when it changes countries. So, $500 may sound easy to some people, but when it's from rupees to [US] dollars, it's a lot.

Despite the prevalent perception from U.S. participants that OPT application fees were high; Samba held a different perspective. While he acknowledged that it was expensive,

especially since he paid for his initial OPT application and paid the same amount again a year later to extend his work authorization for another 24 months, he viewed the cost as a worthwhile investment:

> I mean, it was a little too much, but it's all worth it because I know once you get the job, the amount you will be getting is way more than that. So, it is, you know, worth an investment, I will put it.

When it comes to financial challenges, the cost of securing work authorization was more difficult for participants in the United States compared to their peers in Canada. While most U.S. participants viewed the OPT fees as high, given their limited sources of income, Canadian interviewees did not express concerns about the PGWPP fees. However, in Canada, some participants faced additional costs unrelated to obtaining work authorization. Due to her employment requirements, Fei had to undergo a medical exam costing CAD 200 once her work permit was approved. Gabriella planned to take additional language tests to enhance her score for a future application for permanent residency.

Guidance and Support to Navigate Post-Study Work Programs. The OPT and the PGWPP are national policies designed to regulate the employment of international students in their study destinations. However, as previously mentioned, these policies come with various requirements and restrictions that international students must understand and follow to successfully navigate post-study employment in their host countries. Given the need to understand the program requirements, participants discussed their reliance on guidance and support from their institutions, as well as their peers who had previously gone through the process.

Institutional Guidance and Support. Almost all participants in both countries viewed their international student advisors as valuable resources during the initial phase of their respective post-study work programs. Advisors offered resources and personalized assistance to ensure students understood and complied with the requirements and regulations. Interviewees attended group workshops and one-on-one advising sessions. They also utilized online resources like detailed PDF guides and tutorial videos on institutional websites. Maria highlighted the role of the international office in navigating the OPT program:

> As I said, for me, it was mostly that PDF that the international office offers. It's on the website, so you can just download it. I think it's very clear I didn't have any questions. We just follow it. It's clear, but again, if you have any questions like, for example, the date [laughter] or have any other good questions, you can always go and schedule something with an international student and scholar advisor. There are many resources even on the internet if they are not offered already by your department or by the university.

Anita in Canada echoed Maria, noting that the international office at her institution effectively assisted her during the PGWPP application phase by providing similar support services.

> You know, the international student office at our university has a website that has these videos that you can watch and follow step by step to know what you do. If you don't understand those videos, then you make an appointment with the immigration officer. I mean, you can even reach out directly to the immigration adviser, but I watched the videos, and they were helpful.

The majority of interviewees agreed that international student advisors in both countries played a crucial role in guiding participants through the first stage of their respective post-study work programs. Only one interviewee in the United States reported not being aware of the help the international office at her institution provided to students navigating the OPT. She knew she was required to contact an advisor to sign her immigration document, thus recommending her for the OPT. However, she did not know of workshops and other resources available for international students navigating the program.

Additionally, a participant in Canada (Sophia, discussed previously) also noted her misunderstanding of the rules guiding international students' maternity leave, which resulted in a denial of her work permit application. With better advice from the international office, she could have potentially anticipated the consequences of taking a year-long maternity leave [available to citizens and permanent residents] on her post-study employment eligibility and made a different choice. While institutional support was vital for nine of the 11 interviewees, all participants mentioned the important role peer support played in this phase of the post-study employment journey.

Peers' Guidance and Support. Despite the support and guidance participants received from their institutions, they also consulted their peers who had previously navigated the OPT or PGWPP. For instance, Maria found deciding on the correct employment start date for her OPT challenging. In addition to scheduling an advising session with an international student advisor, she consulted with friends who had already been through the process to ensure she made the right choice. Priya was unaware of the possibility of being assisted by the international office, so she relied entirely on a friend to navigate the complexities of the OPT application process.

> Yes, I didn't really know who to ask because I didn't believe there was a program even on campus, or maybe there is, but I don't really have any exposure to it. So, my friend already applied because he graduated in August, and he already started his process, so I asked him how to do that, and he helped me through the process. He helped me. He kind of sent me the links to the websites that I needed to go into and apply. So yeah. So, it was him who helped me most.

Relying on their peers was also a strategy used in Canada. Unlike Fei, who found information on the IRCC website very clear and helpful, Gabriella did not have answers to her questions when consulting the website. Therefore, before submitting her application, she consulted other students who had previously navigated the PGWPP.

> I, first of all, went through the Canada website and immigration, and I read everything, but it's not very comprehensive, and it's not very concise. It leads you to a lot of questions that you don't really, like there are a lot of things that are not very well explained. So, after reading that and trying to understand it, I had to ask a bunch of people all the time. I would have questions that I didn't know the answer. It was more useful to ask other people who went through the process than the government or try to find official resources because it is just so hard to understand. It's not necessarily like the language. It is like the way that they write. It is just very vague. And yeah, it just opens the floor to a lot of questions. Not very helpful. [laughter]

To successfully navigate the OPT and the PGWPP and prevent any application denial, participants needed to understand what the programs required and how to avoid violating their rules. For this reason, they used resources offered by the international offices in their institutions. They also learned from the experiences of their peers who had previously navigated PSWPs in

their study destinations. Six of the seven US participants relied on resources offered by their international offices. Only one of the participants was unaware of such support services. In Canada, all participants came from the same school. Three of them found the international office helpful. The interviewee whose application was denied reported not being properly advised when taking maternity leave, which impacted her eligibility for the work permit. All participants in this study noted that they consulted their peers while applying for work authorization.

Stage 2: Employment Experiences

During the second stage of the post-study work experience, the participants tried to join the workforce in their study destinations. Interviewees shared their experiences looking for employment and described their job-hunting strategies. They also recounted the challenges they faced along the way. While participants may have used similar strategies to secure employment, they encountered different challenges in their respective study destinations.

Job-hunting Strategies. The first destination for job searches was online hiring platforms. Interviewees explored LinkedIn, Indeed, and other platforms available through their institutions' career centers. Samba, a STEM graduate, noted:

> I've been applying to quite a lot of jobs. If you check my LinkedIn, you see like 90 different applications submitted. You check my Indeed, 80 different applications submitted. You go and check all the different sites for applying for jobs, I applied to multiple jobs.

Upon exploring such platforms, the participants simultaneously applied to a lot of positions to maximize their hiring chances. Despite submitting many applications, they deplored the lack of interview opportunities. Ming, another STEM graduate, added:

> So, I began to hunt for internships from last year, last fall. But I think I applied to 300 or 400 job applications, but I only got two interviews. And I think most of my classmates, they, even some people, applied to 600 job applications, but they also only got two interviews.

Fei in Canada was not in a STEM field. Like students in the United States, she struggled to secure interviews: “I was trying to look for jobs in academia, but I didn’t get any opportunities. I didn’t even get any interviews, which was very frustrating”.

The analysis did not show a significant difference in finding jobs or landing interviews between STEM majors and non-STEM majors, nor between Canada and the United States. All participants noted challenges in securing interviews and finding employment, regardless of their fields of study and host destinations.

Despite their efforts to explore hiring platforms, participants were unsuccessful in securing employment through advertised positions. In Canada, only Anita received a job offer from a position she found online. In the United States, Emma and Maria were the only two who secured jobs through listings on hiring platforms. The remaining participants utilized their networking skills to obtain employment. Samba and Sarah, both STEM graduates, networked within their institutions to find volunteer positions, which allowed them to maintain their OPT status when they were approaching the 90-day deadline to be employed or leave the United States. Fei’s connection with a faculty member in Canada enabled her to land her first job upon graduation. Students who worked off-campus during their studies used the opportunity to secure post-study employment, helping Gabriella in Canada obtain a contract extension at her practicum site. Ming in the United States also secured a position after completing a four-month paid internship with a company and negotiating a full-time position afterward. This highlights the

significance of off-campus student employment as it enables them to explore career options and network and connect with potential employers before graduation.

Attending career fairs and conventions also proved beneficial in helping participants connect with potential employers. However, this strategy was used by U.S. interviewees only. Priya recalled applying without success to various positions advertised online. She met her future employer at a career fair organized by her department, exemplifying a way for institutions to support international students in their quest for employment. Samba and Ming attended conventions and conferences in their fields. Samba managed to land an interview but could not secure the position due to the required security clearance, which he could not obtain as a non-U.S. citizen. Ming found neither an interview nor a job from her convention.

In both countries, students employed similar strategies during the job search. They combined an exploration of hiring platforms with networking skills to secure employment. Table 5 illustrates the employment status of the participants and the strategies they used to find jobs. When I interviewed them, eight of the 11 participants had found work. All three participants who received the work permit were employed in Canada. One worked in the STEM field, while the other two were in non-STEM fields. The participant whose PGWPP application was denied (Sophia) stopped working. In the United States, five of the seven interviewees found employment. Three were in STEM fields, and two were in non-STEM fields. Of the two who had not found employment by the time I interviewed them, one was in a STEM area, and the other was in a non-STEM area.

Four of the 11 participants secured jobs through hiring platforms. Three were in non-STEM fields, while one graduated from a STEM discipline. Two interviewees obtained positions through their internships; one was in Canada and the other in the United States, both in STEM

areas. In the United States, an interviewee with a STEM degree landed a job via a career fair organized by her department. One participant in Canada found employment through her advisor; she was in a non-STEM field.

Table 5

Employment Status and Source of Employment at Time of Interview

Participants	Employment Status	Employment Source	Study Destination	Area of Study	Degree Level
Anita	Employed	Hiring Platform	Canada	Non-STEM	Master's
Fei	Employed	Advisor	Canada	Non-STEM	PhD
Gabriella	Employed	Internship	Canada	STEM	Master's
Sophia	No	N/A	Canada	Non-STEM	Master's
Emma	Job Offer	Hiring Platform	United States	Non-STEM	PhD
John	No	N/A	United States	Non-STEM	PhD
Maria	Employed	Hiring Platform	United States	Non-STEM	Master's
Ming	Job Offer	Internship	United States	STEM	Master's
Samba	Employed	Hiring Platform	United States	STEM	Master's
Sarah	No	N/A	United States	STEM	Master's
Priya	Employed	Career Fair	United States	STEM	Master's

Students' Perceived Challenges to Employment. In both countries, finding employment was a challenging endeavor. For instance, it took Anita nearly a year to secure a full-time job in Canada. Sarah and Samba resorted to volunteering in the United States when they struggled to find full-time positions after graduation. When asked why they faced difficulties in gaining employment, the participants shared various reasons. Some were inherent to the post-study work programs, while others were not. A notable difference was that participants in the United States were more critical of the OPT program, whereas their peers in Canada focused more on challenges not always related to the PGWPP.

Program-Related Challenges. In the United States, the requirements of the OPT program were viewed as the most significant challenge to the transition to employment. Even though the OPT was designed to provide a pathway for international students to gain practical experience through remunerated and/or voluntary employment, participants felt that its requirements put them in situations that did not always facilitate their transition to employment. As stated previously, OPT has the following requirements (USCIS, 2024):

- A mandatory choice of an OPT start date that falls within 60 days of academic program completion, resulting in the work authorization being effective from this date.
- A prohibition on beginning employment before the chosen start date and before program approval and receipt of the employment authorization document.
- A requirement to find and begin employment in the field of study within 90 days of approval, as unemployment for more than 90 days is not allowed under OPT.
- The limited program duration [12 months plus a 24-month extension for specific STEM majors], and
- The eventual need for employer sponsorship to transition to a different work visa to stay with the company.

For some interviewees, these requirements limited their chances of securing employment. For example, employers' expectations of having students start immediately upon hire did not always align with the students' ability to begin work, given the OPT requirements, which resulted in missed opportunities. While Ming submitted a premium OPT application to ensure she could work when her employers wanted her to start, Priya renegotiated to delay the start date of her contract. Unfortunately, Sarah lost an employment opportunity while waiting for her work authorization document to be processed and mailed.

Additionally, John added that the duration of the OPT program could potentially deter employers from hiring international students. When asked about his biggest challenges navigating the OPT process, John responded:

> In terms of challenges, I would say the job opportunities themselves in terms of, like, since you're only limited for the work for a year, I think, in my personal opinion, a lot of employers would probably turn you down because a year is probably not worth their while to go through the hassle of hiring you and then you're done in a year or two. But I could be wrong. I would say that would be one of the biggest issues.

John thought that if an employer had to choose between an international student with uncertain future job prospects due to short work authorization duration and an equally qualified U.S. citizen or permanent resident without such restrictions, the employer would be less inclined to hire the international student.

Students usually receive a 12-month work authorization, and specific STEM majors can be eligible for a 24-month extension. They must apply for the extension before their initial work authorization expires. Given the temporary nature of the OPT program, any employer willing to retain an international graduate beyond the OPT duration would need to petition them for the H-1B visa. This could add potential administrative and financial burden to the employer. Whether this was a reason or not, participants perceived a disadvantage when competing for any position. They reported a significant preference for U.S. citizens and permanent residents on the part of employers during the job-hunting process.

> When I look for other jobs, their job description will very clearly say they want permanent resident status, so they prefer green card holders or American citizens. So, at the very first step, they clearly exclude the people who need a visa sponsor. (Emma)

Sarah echoed such a preference and the tendency for employers to exclude international students from the hiring process:

> But there are also other ones where, sorry, in their applications, it specifically states like US citizens only. And it's always at the bottom. Like I would read through everything. And then I'm like, "Oh, I really like this job". It fits whatever I can do, and then on the bottom, small prints like "US Citizens Only!" Oh my God! (Laughter) I mean, yeah, it's kind of discouraging. But also, I read so many of them that I don't feel anything about it anymore. I'm just like, if a job is too good to be true, I expect that statement to be at the bottom, you know!

Samba added that navigating employment under the OPT status led to multiple rejections despite being qualified for the jobs:

> Yeah. So, absolutely. I've seen like some job descriptions just man!!! Like the descriptions!!! Oh, my goodness!!! I will just read the job description; I was like this job is for me. Then I was like 100% this job is for me, no doubt, like my experience, everything else. Like all the things that they are looking for, is in me. So, there is no way that I will get rejected, right? And then I apply for the job, because of this OPT status and stuff like that, they'll end up rejecting you.

Despite participants' perceptions of their challenges related to the OPT requirements and their foreign status, five US interviewees eventually got employed. One left the United States with his OPT authorization, hoping to find remote employment. He did not find an employer willing to hire on such terms. The other participant, who had not found employment at the time I was interviewing, was eventually hired a few months later.

While interviewees perceived that some OPT requirements challenged their ability to secure employment in the United States, participants in Canada did not experience challenges stemming from the PGWPP requirements. The program gave these graduates a three-year open work permit, allowing employment anywhere in the country, for any employer, and in any field, regardless of degree obtained.

> I won't be staying in academia because it's hard to find a job in academia. Even though I won't be able to be in academia, I would still be able to stay in Canada because I won't have any limitations in terms of my status here to find a job. Yeah, I can find other opportunities. So overall, I think it's a good decision to come to Canada. (Fei)

Students did not face an immediate deadline to secure employment and could start working upon applying for the permit. Therefore, program requirements and duration were not a challenge for Canadian participants as they were for their U.S. counterparts. Interestingly, despite receiving an open work permit that did not restrict their employment to their fields of study, all participants I interviewed in Canada were employed in fields related to their degrees and did not seek employment in other fields.

In terms of challenges, Fei and Gabriella reported a few instances of employers preferring Canadian citizens and permanent residents over international students.

> In Canada, the universities are mostly public universities, and it's required for them to justify why they have to hire someone, not Canadian PR [permanent resident] or Canadian citizen, because they prefer to give job opportunities to PRs and Canadian citizens. That's very explicit, required by law, I think. So, it is harder for a non-PR non-citizen to find a job, especially for universities. They really have to justify why they hire you among all the other candidates who are probably also qualified, and PRs, and

> Canadian citizens. So yeah, my status as an international does restrict me in some sense. (Fei)

Fei was applying for a faculty position at a public university. She believed that the requirement to hire citizens and PR holders was unique to public higher education institutions. No other participant in Canada mentioned such a requirement. Gabriella shared a situation she equated to a potential employer's reluctance to offer her a job due to her international status. Whether the employer did not know how to recruit international students or was just reluctant, Gabriella felt the challenge associated with seeking employment under the post-study work program.

> I went through one of the processes, it went like really far. The interview went really well, and I could see that they were really interested in me. But one thing that they kept asking so much in the same call is like, so are you actually allowed to work in Canada? They asked it, like at least three times in the same call. And they even, they didn't even try to ask it in a different way. It was just like the same question over and over again, trying to make sure that I could actually work here, and yeah, I could definitely see that, that [my international status] was playing a role in that position.

Gabriella added that it was the only time she perceived that her international status and the requirement to obtain work authorization challenged her job-hunting experience in Canada.

Unlike the transition to an H-1B visa in the United States, the transition to permanent residency in Canada does not require employer sponsorship. Therefore, though initially allowed to work in Canada for three years only, the participants did not view the program duration as a hurdle since they were confident about their ability to transition to permanent residency status and stay long-term with their employers if they desired to.

Non-Program-Related Challenges. Other challenges also arose during the job search process. Beyond program-related challenges, respondents faced a poor job market, did not possess local work experience, and had poor or limited interviewing and resume-crafting skills.

In the United States, participants graduated and sought to secure jobs during a period of limited employment opportunities brought on by the recent COVID-19 pandemic and a financial recession. As companies laid off experienced employees, international students struggled to see how they could compete in such a job market, considering their lack of U.S. work experience.

> As I mentioned earlier, without experience, you really really can't get into any entry-level position here. And maybe a couple of years ago, it might have been different, but I believe after the pandemic, there is no apprenticeship. Even internships went down a lot by number because, yeah, they are cutting down the people that have experience and have been involved in their own company. I don't believe they're ready to hire newbies with no experience and get them trained. (Priya)

While most participants had previously worked in their home countries, they lacked professional experience in the United States. The OPT program requires students to find employment directly related to their fields of study. However, the F-1 visa generally restricts their employment to part-time on-campus jobs, which are not always associated with the field of study. Unless students complete an internship, they typically have no work experience outside of their institutions. Ming was the only student who completed a four-month paid internship by the time she graduated and was eventually hired by that same company. Emma's employment as a teaching assistant also helped her land a faculty position.

The participants faced serious challenges in interviewing and writing resumes that aligned with U.S. employers' expectations. Maria, for instance, shared her struggle to interview

well. Similarly, Samba attributed his lack of callbacks to his inability to write a compelling resume that highlighted his skills to a potential hiring manager.

> You check my Indeed; 80 different applications submitted. You go and check my, all the different sites for applying for jobs. I applied to multiple jobs, but nothing. I was just getting rejected, rejected. I was like, guys, someone check my CV, my resume for me, probably it's my resume. My resume was like two pages, I will say, and then somebody suggested to me that a resume should be narrowed down to just one page. So, I attended a workshop where they kinda teach us how to compile a resume. So, I took all the points that they mentioned there, and I updated my resume and sent it to a couple of friends to review it and make sure that it's fine. Then, I started sending in the applications again.

To address the resume-creating challenge, participants consulted friends for help with such skills and used career services at their institutions.

Canadian participants also encountered non-program-related obstacles when trying to secure employment. Fei attributed her challenges to the limited number of positions in her field, her unique research focus, and her need to improve her resume and cover letter.

> I'm not very good at, you know, writing my cover letters, because it's very, it's a very new experience for me, so I needed more practice to be able to say like, yeah, to write good cover letters. Yeah. I think that's my own analysis when I didn't get interviews.

Gabriella also deplored her limited interviewing skills. She shared that in her country, "bragging" about one's competence is viewed negatively. In contrast, in Canada, candidates must "sell themselves well" during an interview to convince hiring managers that they are the right candidates for the positions.

> Yeah, I think the biggest challenge is tailoring your experience and like your resume and your cover letter the way that they do it here. Like, I think it's a very specific way of doing it that you have to understand; otherwise, people won't really pay too much attention. Even though you could have like a lot of experience, but if you don't write it in a certain way, I think it's just very hard to get a callback.

For Anita, crafting a good resume was essential because employers rely increasingly on technology to sift through hundreds of applications and match candidates with positions. She believed this practice might have potentially cost her a few job opportunities. She also thought that the lack of work experience in Canada might have factored into students' challenges in finding employment since employers prioritize internal hires rather than new candidates with no experience in the specific job.

Stage 3: Plans and Options Beyond the OPT and PGWPP

Once students complete their post-study work experience, they must make critical decisions that will profoundly impact their lives and careers. Although most participants had just started their post-study work experiences, we discussed their potential options and plans upon completion of the program. Per program requirements, participants could remain in the study destination by transitioning to the H-1B in the United States or by becoming permanent residents in Canada. Without this transition, they would need to return to their home countries. Pursuing further studies or exploring career opportunities in another country were also possible options.

Staying in the Study Destination. The participants identified two ways to stay in the study destination upon program completion: transitioning to a different visa and status or engaging in further studies. However, there was a marked difference in the experiences of Canadian graduates compared to their peers in the United States regarding their possibility to

stay in their study destinations. Participants in Canada spoke confidently about their possible transition to permanent resident status after their post-study work experience. Fei stated, “It’s very easy to immigrate, to become a permanent resident in Canada if you have a PhD degree. I’ve already applied, and I’ve been invited to apply for permanent residency. So, it’s very, it’s very easy”. Anita and Gabriella also confirmed the perceived ease of transition from the PGWPP to permanent residency. They stressed that the program offers a clear path to permanent residency in Canada, as students can apply for it using their Canadian credentials and 12 months of work experience obtained under the program. Anita stated:

> I’m also looking at applying for my PR [permanent residency], you know. PR works on a point system. My points will sort of increase a bit more once I at least, get a year, one year of work experience in Canada, which will be November of this year, so then I will sort of apply, yeah.

Gabriella concurred by adding:

> I have to have at least a year of work experience. So, I have like a good, like I’m definitely eligible to apply. I’m not too worried because I adapted pretty well to where I am right now. And they continuously say that they want me, they want to keep me in the team, so I’m not too worried about that. But yeah, well, before I had the confirmation that I could stay with my supervisor, yeah, that was really stressful.

In contrast, U.S. participants faced uncertainty about transitioning to a different work visa. Priya’s contract under the OPT was only for ten months, making her worry about her future beyond that. When I asked her what she envisioned beyond the ten-month contract, Priya responded: “Nothing, quite a blank”. Other participants hired for the entire 12 months also expressed uncertainty about their future after the OPT program. The employment experience

gained under OPT does not automatically result in permanent residency. To legally stay beyond program completion, students must transition to the H-1B visa, which requires employer sponsorship. Despite needing this sponsorship, they struggled to find employers willing to petition them. Samba said, “You can be working for them [a company] for three years without them thinking about sponsoring you”. Even during the job search, some participants were afraid to reveal their need for eventual sponsorship.

> I didn’t ask if they would file H-1B or these things when I started. Well, now that I asked, this company doesn’t file for H-1B. I know some of my colleagues or my classmates that they had to ask from the beginning: “Do you guys sponsor for [the] H-1B?” Yeah, that’s also kind of an interesting situation because they can just reject you because of that. You know it’s daunting. It’s tiring. Some people told me when I was applying, because in some applications also, they put there the option of: “Are you planning in the future to apply for an H-1B?” And they [her friends] said, put no, because they’re not even going to give you the job. Maybe that’s also something to consider. (Maria)

Except for Emma, whose employer had already sponsored her H-1B visa, all participants were uncertain about the future of their careers in the United States. Ming believed she would be sponsored at the end of her OPT experience. Maria and Priya already knew their employers would not sponsor a visa. Samba had not yet discussed the issue with his employer, and Sarah was still looking for more permanent employment at the time of the interview. Additionally, having an employer willing to sponsor the students does not guarantee a positive outcome for the H-1B application, which has an annual cap of 85,000 visas a year (Trevena, 2019; USCIS, 2023a), and its issuance is based on a lottery system (USCIS, 2023). Given that there are more applicants than the allotted number of visas issued every year, getting the H-1B is pure luck

since a lottery is used to select recipients: "To cope with this excessive demand for the work visas, the USCIS has employed a lottery to choose successful candidates" (Semotiuk, 2019, para. 2).

The uncertainty surrounding the students' transition to a different visa led two U.S. participants to consider pursuing further studies to extend their stay legally. For example, before receiving a job offer, Emma worried about her future after completing her PhD. As a result, she had already started a master's program in a STEM-related field, aiming to leverage the 36-month OPT opportunity available to STEM graduates. Similarly, upon discovering that her company would not sponsor her upon completing the OPT, Maria contemplated applying to another program to keep her F-1 visa.

In Canada, Anita was the only student who enrolled in a PhD program after earning her master's degree. Unlike the U.S. participants, who explored further studies mainly to keep their student visas, Anita was already granted work authorization, which allowed her to extend her stay in Canada for three years. She was also employed full-time while pursuing her PhD.

Exploring Career Options in Other Countries. While no participants in Canada planned to leave the country to explore career opportunities in another destination, Sarah, a U.S. participant who was aware of the differences in immigration and employment policies between the two nations, considered Canada as an option. For her, Canada's policies were more favorable and welcoming to international students. As she struggled to find employment, she did not exclude the possibility of moving to Canada to look for a job, hoping that her U.S. credentials could help her succeed in the Canadian job market. She noted that when U.S. companies laid off employees, Canada invited international graduates holding an H-1B visa in the United States to

go and work in Canada with a possible path to permanent residency. Beyond Sarah, no participant considered leaving the United States to explore a career elsewhere.

Returning Home and Career-Related Challenges. As previously mentioned, post-study work programs in Canada and the United States require students to leave their country of study upon program completion unless they transition to a different visa or status. Despite this requirement, Canadian participants did not envision failing to secure permanent residency, given the clear path offered by the PGWPP. Sophia was the only student who faced the risk of potentially returning home due to the denial of her PGWPP application.

U.S. graduates were also required to leave the country if they failed to transition to another visa. Despite the looming difficulties and challenges in securing long-term work visas, none of the participants considered returning to their home countries a viable career option. Emma had already received her H-1B sponsorship, but the remaining participants had not. While Canadian participants seemed to have a clear route to stay, U.S. graduates did not.

Regardless of their countries of origin and study destinations, the interviewees wanted to stay upon graduation. They were attracted by the perceived better working conditions in the study destinations and pushed away from their home countries by potential challenges limiting their employability as international graduates. As Emma noted:

> People around me, I mean they would like to stay in America. They are seeking opportunities for Green Cards for staying here. And they keep telling me to stay. For my daughter's schooling and her future, I should stay in America. I think people keep telling me about that.

Samba, Sarah, and Ming came to the U.S. to study majors unavailable in their home countries. They believed that if they returned home, they would encounter underdeveloped or nonexistent industries in their fields, which would limit their career options.

> With the infrastructure or opportunities right now, I don't think anything will change drastically in six or eight years. But again, I'm not completely closed off to it. But realistically speaking, there won't be any specialized jobs for me in my country. (Sarah)

Ming and Priya deplored the gender-based discrimination they would face if they returned to China and India, respectively.

> It's harder for women in China to find a job. So, during the interview, they may ask you your age, or are you married, or do you have any plans to have children? I mean, some kind of questions like that. (Ming)

Illustrating a similar point, Priya added:

> It's just hard to get in, and it takes years and years to break that glass door, especially for women. In my country, they believe women are just meant to work in the kitchen, at home, and take care of kids. It's a kind of traditional way of thinking; that's the reason why they won't hire women in management or at the high level of the organization. It will be mostly the entry-level or mid-portion of the company, and they [women] don't really get managerial positions in my country. That's the reason I really don't want to work there.

Another deciding factor for Ming was the lack of work-life balance. She chose to study in the United States because of China's "996" work culture, which, according to her, involves working long hours from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, and constant high pressure. For these individuals, international education and experience pose more limitations than advantages for

pursuing a career in their home countries. As Samba pointed out, his primary concern upon returning to his country would be, “Who will hire me?”

Gabriella and Sophia noted their desire to stay and work in Canada. Gabriella faced academic tracking in Brazil, which impacted her career options at home. She shared how her undergraduate focus determines the field in which she can work in her home country. Such restrictions do not exist in Canada, opening up broader career possibilities for her.

> I miss Brazil a lot, but like I said, in my area and my partner’s area, it’s just a little bit harder than it is here. In a way, we definitely don’t have all the resources, and it’s [her field of study] very undervalued. And for me, it’s mostly like, for example, when you are applying sometimes, they don’t even care here [in Canada] about your undergrad[uate], sometimes you don’t even see it. It’s mostly like: What’s your current education? It has more weight. But in Brazil, like it really counts, like I said, so for me, for example, if I wanted to work like frontline, directly with the community, it was gonna be really, really hard if not almost impossible there [in Brazil]. And this is what I like to do. So yeah, this is something that I don’t think was gonna be very easy there. So, yeah, I don’t think I would go back and try.

Anita also discussed the limited career options in her field in India, so she decided against pursuing a career there.

Summary of the Findings

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of this qualitative study, which explored the factors guiding selected international graduate students in choosing their study destinations. Seven participants shared their reasons for studying in the United States, while four interviewees

explained why they chose Canada. Six main factors guided the choice of study destinations for these 11 participants.

1- Academic considerations,
2- Language and culture,
3- Financial concerns,
4- Post-study employment and immigration,
5- Social influences, and,
6- Students' perception of a country and society.

Participants from both countries indicated that academic considerations were important factors in their choice of study destination. However, certain factors played a more significant role in attracting students to one country over the other. For instance, institutional funding was a determining factor that pulled most participants to the United States. However, it did not play a key role in Canada, where participants struggled to secure funding and mostly paid the full cost of their education. On the contrary, the favorable immigration policies, including the PGWPP, were significant in pulling participants to Canada. Immigration policies, however, were a major concern for U.S. participants despite their interest in post-study employment. Interviewees in both countries agreed that social connections in the host country influenced their choice of study destination. Moreover, compared to the United States, interviewees in Canada had a more positive perception of the country and Canadian society in general, drawing them to that country.

The second research question examined the experiences and perspectives of selected international graduate students as they navigated employment in the United States and Canada. Interviewees discussed the various stages of their post-study work experience, including obtaining work authorization, finding employment, and the potential impact of the program

requirements on their careers and lives. Students in both countries faced challenges, but differences between the OPT [United States] and PGWPP [Canada] programs affected the respondents in distinct ways. For instance, while in the United States, one of the main challenges was meeting the deadlines and various requirements of the OPT program, participants in Canada did not have to worry about deadlines to secure employment or risk losing their post-study opportunities. U.S. participants expressed frustration with the high fees associated with the OPT application and the processing delays. Conversely, Canadian participants found the program fees affordable. Delays in processing the PGWPP application did not impede the students' ability to begin employment, as they could work while awaiting approval as long as their applications were submitted.

In both countries, there were challenges to securing meaningful employment. In the United States, those who were hired faced the uncertainty of transitioning to an H-1B visa, making it difficult to establish a career and a life in their study destination. On the other hand, participants in Canada had a more positive experience with the PGWPP and had more certainty about their post-study work experience. Except for one student whose application was denied, all three interviewees believed that working under the program would lead to a transition to permanent residency and a long-term settlement in Canada, giving them hope for the future. While there were notable differences in the rationales for selecting a host destination and the post-study work experiences based on the country of study, this research did not find any differences based on STEM vs. non-STEM areas.

The next chapter discusses the key findings of this study and situates them within the broader literature and the main theoretical framework. The push-pull model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) guided the exploration of the first research question, which examined the participants'

rationales for selecting a study destination. The next chapter also addresses the implications and limitations of this study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was threefold: (1) to identify the factors guiding selected international graduate students to study in the United States and Canada, (2) to explore the selected students' perceptions of their experiences navigating employment through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) in Canada and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States, and (3) to examine the similarities and differences in the students' rationales for choosing a study destination and their experiences navigating post-study employment in the host country.

Using a basic exploratory qualitative research design, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 international graduate students who had completed their master's or PhD degrees in Canada and the United States. Seven participants graduated from institutions in the United States, and four from Canada. These participants were based in various states and provinces, and all interviews were conducted online via Zoom.

The following research questions guided this qualitative research:

1. What factors influenced the selected international graduate students to study in Canada and the United States?
2. How do the selected international graduate students describe their experiences navigating post-study employment in Canada and the United States, considering the respective post-study work program requirements?
3. In what ways, if any, are the rationales for choosing a study destination and the experiences of selected international graduate students navigating post-study work programs in the two countries similar or different?

To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to compare the OPT and PGWPP not from a policy standpoint but rather from the perspectives and experiences of international students who navigate them. Consequently, it offers valuable insights for policymakers, higher education institutions, employers, and international students. This chapter discusses the following: (a) key findings in relation to the framework guiding this study and existing literature; (b) limitations of the study; (c) implications of the findings for policymakers, higher education, employers, and international students. Lastly, I provide directions for future research and the conclusion.

Discussion of Key Findings

In this section, I present and discuss the key findings of this study, organized according to the research questions. As mentioned previously, this research aimed to explore three research questions: (1) the factors that attracted the selected international graduate students to study in Canada and the United States, (2) their experiences and perspectives on the OPT in the United States and the PGWPP in Canada, and (3) the similarities and differences in the reasons that guided these students in choosing their study destinations and their experiences navigating post-study employment.

However, as discussed previously, when I started analyzing the data, it became clear that the comparative aspect of the third research question was embedded in the entire study rather than functioning as a standalone question. I chose not to present this comparison in isolation. Instead, such comparison was integrated throughout the study, particularly in how I presented and discussed the first and second research questions. Therefore, the findings chapter does not feature a separate section devoted to the third research question, as I discussed the findings comparatively to highlight the similarities and differences expressed by the participants, focusing

on their individual rationales and experiences while also considering the specific country of study.

Research Question 1: Factors Guiding International Graduate Students to Canada and the United States

The first research question explored the factors attracting international graduate students to their study destinations, particularly the United States and Canada. Six factors were identified as influencing the participants' decisions: (1) academic considerations; (2) language and culture; (3) financial concerns; (4) post-study employment and immigration policies, including post-study work programs; (5) social influences; and (6) students' perception of a country and society.

At the graduate level, academic considerations played a crucial role, including the availability and quality of programs, faculty expertise, and language of instruction. English, the official language of these destinations, was especially appealing to the participants. Social influences, such as having family, relatives, or friends in the country of study, also impacted their decisions. Regarding quality and value, most students perceived the education in Canada and the United States to be similar. Participants concurred that better employment prospects in North America also motivated their choices of study destination.

In addition to these factors, a key finding of this study is the significance of funding availability in attracting international graduate students to the United States. Five of the seven U.S. interviewees reported receiving financial support from their host institutions, such as scholarships or graduate assistantships. Due to high cost of education and living, financial considerations were crucial in selecting both the host country and the host institution. In contrast, the study emphasizes favorable immigration policies and post-study work programs as major factors attracting international graduate students to Canada. Apart from perceiving Canada as

diverse, open, and welcoming to immigrants and international students, three Canadian participants pinpointed the appealing PGWPP requirements as a decisive element in their choice. For these students, pursuing education in Canada was a pathway to attaining long-term immigration goals.

Positioning the Study Within the Push-Pull Framework

Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull framework is a widely recognized model for analyzing and understanding international student mobility. This framework explains how push factors in students' home countries compel them to seek education abroad, while pull factors in host countries attract them to specific destinations. According to this model, the decision-making process occurs in three stages: first, students evaluate the push factors in their home countries that influence them to study abroad; second, they assess the pull factors of potential host countries; and third, they consider institution-level factors before making a final choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 83). This framework partially informed the design of this study, particularly in examining the rationales guiding international graduate students' decisions to study in Canada and the United States.

Push Factors Driving Students to Study Abroad. In this study, limited access to quality education in the students' home countries emerged as a critical push factor, consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) findings. Challenges such as unavailable majors, difficulty gaining admission to local programs, and the perception of better educational quality in the United States and Canada motivated the 11 graduate students interviewed. These participants cited unavailable majors, the complex and competitive admission process at home, and their desire for quality education as primary reasons for pursuing studies in North America. These findings align with

the framework's emphasis on the lack of local educational opportunities as a driver of international student mobility.

Pull Factors Attracting Students to Study Destinations. The findings of this study support the institutional pull factors identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), particularly the significance of institutional reputation, program quality, and flexible admission. Participants from the United States and Canada highlighted these factors as influential. However, this study's conclusion regarding the size of the international student body does not align with Mazzarol and Soutar's finding, as none of the participants considered this aspect when choosing an institution.

While Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) observed that interest in Western culture attracted some students to their countries of study, this motivation was not significantly evident in this research. The exception was Maria, a translation major who aimed to enhance her language skills and cultural understanding of the United States. However, English language proficiency emerged as the primary draw for most students. Studying in an English-speaking country, such as the United States or Canada, was a way to improve both academic and professional prospects, thereby elevating the prestige of their degrees.

A significant divergence from Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) findings lies in the role of immigration and employment policies. While these scholars reported that job opportunities and immigration intentions influenced 59 percent of their sample from India to study abroad, they did not recognize immigration and employment policies as decisive factors in choosing specific host countries. This study shows that favorable immigration and employment policies were crucial factors for students selecting Canada. Participants emphasized the attractiveness of the Canadian PGWPP, which provides a clear pathway from education to employment and the possibility of permanent residency. The chance of long-term settlement motivated three participants to self-

fund their studies, using their life savings and family support despite the absence of institutional funding.

Conversely, immigration policies were not appealing to participants in the United States. Only one interviewee stated having immigration intentions before studying in the country. Instead, consistent with the literature, participants highlighted the attractive employment opportunities, particularly in STEM fields. This study extends the push-pull framework by illustrating the crucial role of immigration and employment policies in shaping international students' destination choices.

The push-pull framework (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) identified six pull factors at the country level that influence students' choices: (1) knowledge and awareness of the host country; (2) recommendations and referrals; (3) cost of education; (4) climate or environment; (5) geographic proximity; and (6) social links, such as family or friends in the country of study. The findings of this study reinforce the significance of knowledge and awareness of the host country as a key factor. Participants utilized technology and social media to research destinations and seek guidance from alumni or peers, reflecting a shift in how this pull factor is operationalized.

Recommendations, referrals, and social links were also significant in this research and in line with the push-pull framework. These factors were categorized under the broader theme of "social influence", where participants relied on guidance from family, friends, educational agents, or faculty. Sometimes, having friends or family members established in the study destinations directly influenced the participants.

Cost emerged as a significant factor in this study, aligning with previous research. While respondents generally viewed tuition and living expenses in both countries as high, financial mechanisms such as scholarships and assistantships in the United States and subsidized housing

in Canada were crucial in offsetting these costs and attracting students to specific programs and institutions.

Unlike Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) original findings, geographic proximity was not a relevant pull factor in this research. Students from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas chose to study in North America regardless of the physical distance from their home countries. This divergence may stem from the fact that the Indonesian students [one of the four groups the scholars studied to develop the push-pull framework] viewed Australia as a convenient destination.

The current findings generally align with the push-pull framework, reaffirming its value as a tool for analyzing international student mobility. The model's significance is confirmed by its 2737 citations since 2002, as noted by *Google Scholar* (2025). However, utilizing this framework in this study has allowed me to note significant deviations, particularly the decreased importance of geographic proximity and the increased significance of immigration and employment policies as pull factors. In 2002, Mazzarol and Soutar found that some students preferred to study in destinations near their home countries. For instance, the Indonesian students they examined opted for Australia, which was closer to Indonesia. Nowadays, as the world has evolved into a global village and travel opportunities have increased, none of the participants I interviewed considered geographic proximity a factor when selecting a country for study. Therefore, this factor should be reconsidered when using the push-pull framework. In contrast, the framework should incorporate contemporary dynamics, such as post-study work programs, which enhance the attractiveness of major study destinations. While students in 2002 did not emphasize such opportunities in their study decisions, this study indicates that these programs now play a crucial role in guiding students toward their destinations. Scholars should, therefore,

consider post-study work programs and immigration policies in the host nation when utilizing the push-pull framework to analyze international student mobility. Consequently, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing international graduate students pursuing their degrees in Canada and the United States during this era of global competition for international students and talented graduates.

Positioning the Study Within a Broader Context

Research consistently shows that educational quality is an important rationale for international students selecting their study destinations. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) noted that "Quality of reputation is likely to remain the most important factor influencing study destination choice" (p. 90). Similarly, Chen and Li (2023) reported that aside from career opportunities, "The reason why international students choose to study abroad is mainly due to the higher quality of education" (p. 17). Similarly, Esaki-Smith (2021) found that most international students pursue courses abroad for their quality or unique subject specializations that are unavailable at home.

Previous studies have shown that graduate students are attracted to Canada and the United States because of the variety of program offerings, the prestige of institutions, the appeal of the English language, the opportunities to collaborate with expert faculty, and strong research infrastructures (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2021; Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Chen & Li, 2023; Han & Appelbaum, 2016; Lee, 2008) Specifically, Lee (2008) argued that "Many international students are highly drawn to the reputation and prestige of the university when making their decision to study abroad" (p. 322). The findings of this study support these conclusions. Academic quality and opportunities emerged as key factors in drawing international graduate students to North America, highlighting the ongoing significance of educational quality as a critical pull factor.

Financial factors also significantly influence international students' choices. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of cost, funding availability, and work opportunities during studies (Chen & Li, 2023; Han & Appelbaum, 2016; Lee, 2008; Nafari et al., 2017). This study's findings affirm these observations, with graduate assistantships and scholarships emerging as influential factors for participants studying in the United States and subsidized housing in Canada being appealing without institutional funding.

Social influences are another critical factor in the decision-making process of international students. This study aligns with research by Lee (2008) and Han and Appelbaum (2016), indicating that preexisting social connections in the host country strongly impacted students' choices. Knowing friends or family members already living in their destinations provided participants valuable support to ease their transition to academic and social life in the United States and Canada.

Perhaps the most important finding is that post-study employment opportunities and immigration policies influence the selection of host destinations, supporting earlier research (Arthur et al., 2022; Esaki-Smith, 2021; Findlay et al., 2017; Haisley et al., 2021; Joshi & Ziguras, 2024; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Netierman et al., 2022; Soetan & Nguyen, 2018; Tran et al., 2022). For example, *IDP Connect* (2023) noted that "The availability of post-study work visas is the main or influencing factor in where to study" (p. 7). Likewise, Tran et al. (2023) remarked that "International graduates have high expectations of post-study employment outcomes, including gaining work experience in the host country and getting a return on their overseas study investment" (p. 2). Joshi and Ziguras (2024) also discovered that post-study work rights are increasingly significant in students' decisions to study abroad. The findings of this study support these observations, with participants identifying post-study employment and

immigration pathways as significant influences. The PGWPP often appeared as a crucial factor in Canada, aligning with Zhang et al. (2021), who discovered that favorable immigration policies and opportunities draw students to Canada.

In contrast, participants in the United States highlighted post-graduation employment opportunities over immigration pathways, reflecting the country's more restrictive immigration policies. This finding aligns with Han and Appelbaum (2016), who noted that career prospects are crucial in attracting international graduate students to the United States. Other studies have similarly highlighted the significance of employment opportunities in students' decisions (Bhandari et al., 2018; Choudaha, 2018; Gesing et al., 2021; Han & Appelbaum, 2016; Lee, 2008; Nafari et al., 2017; Ugwu & Adamuti-Trache, 2017). Bhandari et al. (2018) noted that "The opportunity to gain practical work experience is growing in importance as a driver of student mobility around the globe" (p. 5). Likewise, Cameron et al. (2019) and Haisley et al. (2021) pointed out that access to employment opportunities and internships in the host country is essential for facilitating international students' transitions into the local labor market.

Exploring the drivers of student mobility to Canada and the United States revealed key differences in how students perceive the immigration policies of each nation and how these policies informed their rationales for selecting their study destinations. Soetan and Nguyen (2018) and Oduwaye et al. (2023) argued that inclusive immigration policies offer a competitive advantage over countries with more restrictive post-study work options. This study, which compares the PGWPP in Canada to the OPT in the United States, reinforces these observations. Participants explicitly cited immigration pathways as their main motivation for choosing to study in Canada, while their peers in the United States placed greater emphasis on employment

opportunities. The study, therefore, adds to the extensive literature on the factors that drive international student mobility to North America.

Research Question 2: Perspectives and Experiences Navigating Post-Study Work Programs

The second research question explored the experiences and perspectives of international graduate students navigating post-study employment under the OPT program in the United States and the PGWPP in Canada. Findings indicate that students generally report a more positive experience in Canada compared to the United States. For example, international graduate students in the United States often find it challenging to navigate the OPT deadlines and requirements. Another key finding highlights students' difficulties in securing employment in both countries. A third key finding focuses on the uncertainty international graduates encounter in the United States after completing the OPT program. The following discussion focuses on these three findings.

Given the relatively higher levels of satisfaction reported by the students participating in the Canadian PGWPP, two of the three findings address the challenges faced by U.S. students navigating the OPT program. In contrast, one finding applies to both countries.

U.S. International Graduate Students Find the OPT Deadlines and Requirements Difficult to Navigate

For the informants in this study, the OPT program's strict requirements and tight deadlines present significant challenges to establishing their careers in the United States. These students must navigate rigid timelines to secure work authorization and job opportunities, often under the threat of leaving the country if they are unsuccessful. However, obtaining work authorization and integrating into the workforce is lengthy and complicated (Redden, 2019; Sharma, 2025; Song & Kim, 2022).

Song and Kim (2022) noted that U.S. immigration policies impose an undue burden on international students, requiring them to transition "quickly and seamlessly within a strict timeframe" without considering the various factors impacting the job search process (p. 576). This study supports these findings by highlighting the complexity of the OPT application process as a significant challenge for students. For instance, the program's limitation of a 90-day unemployment period after the approved start date creates uncertainty and hesitancy among students. The students grapple with whether to submit their OPT application early or late, as either choice can hinder their employment prospects. Participants in this study conveyed concern that they often felt pressured to secure employment within a short three-month window after graduation or risk leaving the country.

In addition to tight deadlines, students also encounter prolonged processing delays. Historically, the OPT processing time was approximately 90 days, but USCIS acknowledges that backlogs have extended this period (Redden, 2019). Applicants generally wait three to five months (Redden, 2019) and occasionally up to six months (Sharma, 2025) to receive work authorization. This finding aligns with reports from participants in this study, who similarly experienced delays of three to five months. These delays have significant implications for graduates, forcing them to renegotiate job contracts, postpone employment start dates, or even miss hiring opportunities because they cannot work without USCIS approval and before receiving their Employment Authorization Document (EAD). Redden (2019) also raised concerns about the lengthy OPT processing times, noting that university officials frequently criticize these delays for their detrimental impact on students' ability to begin employment. One university staff member reported that these delays leave "some students with job or internship offers, unable to take up their positions on time" (Redden, 2019, para. 1).

Students also encounter inconsistencies within the program's requirements when navigating the OPT process. A concern was highlighted by a university official who argued that while students cannot apply for OPT until at least 90 days before graduation, USCIS often takes longer than 90 days to issue employment authorization, which is an "unacceptable" discrepancy (Redden, 2019, para. 4). Redden interviewed an immigration attorney who suggested that these delays were "not negligence but rather design [ed]" to slow or obstruct legal immigration (Redden, 2019, para. 16). Whether intentional or not, the structure of the OPT program is marked by numerous and complex requirements. For participants, it feels more obstructive than supportive.

As the findings of this study indicate, the tight timeline to secure employment or leave the country, the enforcement of the 90-day unemployment cap, and long processing delays, combined with students' not being allowed to begin employment before OPT approval and receipt of their work authorization, can significantly hinder their ability to transition to employment without violating the conditions of the OPT program.

International Graduate Students in Both the United States and Canada Encounter Challenges in Securing Employment

A notable finding from this study is that international graduates face difficulties securing employment, no matter what their study destination is. Previous studies have supported these observations by highlighting the substantial challenges that international students encounter when pursuing employment in prominent study locations (Arthur et al., 2022; Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Calonge et al., 2023; Chen & Li, 2023; Coffey et al., 2021; Esaki-Smith, 2021; Grimm, 2019; Jacobs, 2022; Jiang & Kim, 2019; Joshi & Ziguras, 2024; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Scott et al., 2015; Song & Kim, 2022; Tran et al., 2022; Ugwu & Adamuti-Trache, 2017; Yu, 2016).

In the United States, international students struggle to secure employment, not because of a lack of talent but due to the complex requirements of the OPT program. Calonge et al. (2023) support this observation, stating that "Various factors such as immigration policies and regulations pose a challenge for international graduates" and noting that these regulations and procedures impede graduates' ability to remain in the country (pp. 195-196). For instance, the U.S. OPT program offers 12 months of work authorization, with a 24-month extension available for specific STEM majors. However, the countdown begins on the approved start date and not when employment is secured. As a result, students often find themselves with less than a year remaining on their initial work authorization when they ultimately receive job offers, diminishing their chances of being hired.

Another complexity of the OPT program is the requirement that students do not start employment before receiving approval. This restriction often leaves students unavailable when employers need them, further complicating their job search. Employers looking to hire immediately end up prioritizing citizens and permanent residents not subject to such legal requirements. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that employers are reluctant to hire international graduates, favoring citizens and permanent residents (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Cameron et al., 2019), a trend evident in both the United States and Canada. Employers frequently view international students as less desirable due to the high costs and administrative burdens of securing work visas (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Cameron et al., 2019). Furthermore, the temporary nature of work visas, the uncertainty regarding the ability to obtain more permanent visas, and employers' lack of familiarity with immigration regulations contribute to this reluctance. (Song and Kim (2022) stated that employers' unfamiliarity with immigration rules can significantly hinder international students' ability to find employment (p 576).

Furthermore, participants reported that even when granted work authorization, their citizenship or national origin automatically disqualified them from positions that explicitly required citizenship or permanent residency. This finding corroborates rumors that national policies frequently restrict specific roles to citizens or permanent residents (Chen & Li, 2023; Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Tran et al., 2020, as cited in Calonge et al., 2023). Tran et al. (2020) argue that "Visa restrictions and complex immigration regulations can limit their [international graduates'] eligibility for certain types of employment" (as cited in Calonge et al., 2023, p 187).

An additional significant obstacle international students face in Canada and the United States is the lack of local work experience and networking opportunities. Previous research has stressed the importance of these factors in facilitating the transition to employment (Arthur et al., 2022). Song and Kim (2022) highlighted that "International students have limited opportunities for hands-on work experience" (p. 577), which is essential for securing employment after graduation. Employers frequently demand prior industry experience beyond internships or unpaid work-integrated learning (Calonge et al., 2023, p. 195).

In the United States, F-1 visa regulations restrict students to on-campus employment, often not aligning with their fields of study. In contrast, the OPT program requires students to find jobs in areas directly related to their majors. Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Pre-Completion OPT programs allow off-campus employment during studies, but these options can impact eligibility for Post-Completion OPT. CPT is an "alternative work-study, cooperative education, or any other type of required internship or practicum ... offered by sponsoring employers through cooperative agreements with the school and must be an integral part of an established curriculum" (USCIS, 2025, Section B F-1 Student Curricular Practical Training). While CPT does not necessarily disqualify students from Post-Completion OPT, working under

CPT for a year or more makes them ineligible for Post-Completion OPT. Additionally, Pre-Completion OPT, which is used for off-campus employment not included in a school curriculum, reduces the 12 months available for post-completion OPT since time spent on pre-completion OPT is automatically deducted from the total time allotted for post-completion OPT (USCIS, 2024). These requirements may discourage students from participating in internships despite the benefits of gaining work experience and building professional networks. In this study, two participants who took part in off-campus internships found employment at their internship sites after graduation.

Another common challenge for international students in both countries is the lack of preparation to navigate the job search process. Difficulties include insufficient interviewing skills and creating resumes or cover letters that align with North American employers' expectations while showcasing their unique qualifications. Additionally, when students come from cultures that view boasting about one's abilities as inappropriate, they find it challenging to convince employers of their merits.

These findings align with prior research, which highlights that cultural differences significantly influence international students' employment prospects (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Tran et al. 2023), especially for Eastern students in Western countries (Chen & Li, 2023, p. 18). Furthermore, Arthur and Flynn (2013) stressed, "With the lack of knowledge on the host country's employment opportunities, international students tend to face more difficulties, especially at the beginning of their job search" (p. 18). Therefore, universities that monitor the percentages of their graduates hired in various fields should consider employing career counselors with intercultural knowledge and skills. These professionals can help international

graduates market themselves effectively to align with the expectations of North American employers.

International Graduate Students Seeking to Establish a Career in the United States Face Uncertainty Upon OPT Completion

The current study illuminates the uncertainty international graduate students encounter in the United States as they attempt to transition from the OPT program to a more permanent visa, like the H-1B. These findings support previous research highlighting the challenges international graduate students face after completing their post-study work programs. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) observed that international students experience significant stress and pressure due to immigration policies and the uncertainty surrounding their futures after graduation. Increasing documentation requirements and policy barriers often obstruct their aspirations to build a career in the host country (p. 57). While they had only just begun their careers when interviewed, most participants anticipated the difficulty of securing an H-1B visa to stay in the United States once they completed the OPT program. The H-1B visa necessitates employer sponsorship, and students frequently encounter obstacles in finding employers willing to sponsor them.

Employers' hesitance to sponsor international students for the H-1B visa has been well-documented in previous literature. Studies show that employers are often discouraged by the administrative burden, financial costs, and low likelihood of success in the H-1B lottery system (Jacobs, 2022; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Song & Kim, 2022). The H-1B visa program has a cap of 85,000 visas each year, with 65,000 allocated for general applicants and 20,000 reserved for individuals holding advanced degrees (Macfadden & Seedorf, 2017). However, for fiscal year 2024, the number of eligible applications reached 350,103, significantly surpassing the visa

cap (Anderson, 2023). This discrepancy has resulted in a lottery system that determines who receives the visa, leaving students and employers uncertain about their prospects (Jacobs, 2022).

This lottery system fails to prioritize applicants in critical fields like STEM, which puts employers and the broader U.S. economy at a disadvantage (Jacobs, 2022). Esaki-Smith (2021) warned that the OPT program is an essential way for the United States to compete with other countries for global talent and to benefit from the contributions of international graduates. Nevertheless, the uncertainty surrounding the H-1B visa process complicates the transition for international students seeking to enter the U.S. workforce.

Faced with the uncertainty of obtaining an H-1B visa, some international students pursue further studies to extend their F-1 visa status. In contrast, others explore career opportunities in countries with more welcoming immigration policies, with Canada being viewed as an attractive alternative. Esaki-Smith (2021) pointed out that Canada's navigable immigration procedures attract international students and entice foreign graduates who struggle to secure employment in the United States (p. 2).

Visa-related challenges, particularly those faced in the United States, significantly influence international students' decisions to depart after graduation, resulting in a loss of talent for the country (Jacobs, 2022). This finding highlights the pressure international students experience while navigating complex immigration policies and an uncertain future after graduation. In Canada, where the PGWPP is viewed as more favorable, and participants anticipated a smoother transition to permanent residency, Chen and Li (2023) caution that "Nothing is guaranteed in terms of visa application or immigration status when one has the identity of an international student" (p. 21). This statement sums up international graduates'

broader vulnerability regarding their immigration status and job prospects, even in countries with more lenient immigration policies.

This study addressed a critical gap in the scholarship by exploring the experiences and perspectives of international graduate students navigating the PGWPP in Canada and the OPT in the United States. Unlike previous research that predominantly focused on the viewpoints of receiving nations and their policymakers, this study emphasizes students' lived experiences. The primary goal was to expand the existing literature on the drivers of student mobility to Canada and the United States and provide a deeper understanding of post-study work programs in these countries. This research addresses an important gap in literature, revealing that beyond factors like educational quality, funding, and social connections, international graduate students place significant importance on career opportunities and potential immigration when selecting their study destinations. Therefore, the requirements of the post-study work program can either enable or hinder these students' aspirations, significantly impacting their lives and careers.

Limitations of the Study

Like all research projects, this study has its limitations. It focused on the experiences and perspectives of 11 international graduate students and did not reflect the experiences of all international students pursuing degrees in Canada and the United States. No male students in Canada volunteered to participate, and only two male students participated in the United States. Therefore, the perspectives and experiences depicted in this study are predominantly from female international graduate students. Additionally, more students in the United States [n=7] were willing to share their experiences than in Canada [n=4].

Furthermore, the snowball sampling method used to recruit participants resulted in all interviewees in Canada coming from the same institution, although they had different majors and

came from various countries. I faced a similar challenge in the United States, where four of seven participants were from the same institution. Fortunately, the remaining three were from different institutions. This sampling method may have influenced the findings, as participants may have likely recommended peers with similar experiences.

Using technology to conduct the interviews allowed me to include more participants from different states in the United States and one province in Canada. However, interviewing on Zoom eliminated the face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the participants, which may have impacted the quality of the data collected. I offered the participants the option to turn on their webcam or leave it off; some chose not to use video.

Finally, while the push-pull framework offers a valuable lens for understanding the factors attracting international graduate students to Canada and the United States, its origins in the early 2000s may limit its relevance to more recent trends in international education. This framework might not fully capture the emergence of post-study work programs (PSWPs) and other changing dynamics in international student mobility. Furthermore, the push-pull framework did not sufficiently address the second research question regarding the students' experiences with PSWPs, which are policy-driven initiatives. For future research on similar topics, one alternative would be to use the push-pull framework alongside the Bacchi framework, which is better suited for analyzing policies and their implications (Riemann, 2023).

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theory and practice, providing valuable insights for policymakers, employers, higher education institutions, and international graduate students who are studying or planning to study in the United States or Canada. Because my research focused on the needs of international students, these

recommendations reflect changes in policy and practice that would benefit the students themselves. However, attracting talented students to U.S. and Canadian higher education institutions and helping them to use their talents in each country after graduation also benefits universities, employers, and each country's economy.

Policymakers

The study underscores the critical role of policies in shaping the experiences of international graduate students in a country. Career aspirations and post-study opportunities, including immigration pathways, significantly influence students' decisions to study in the United States and Canada. By aligning post-study work programs with the career goals of international students, policymakers can enhance enrollment and retention of highly skilled graduates while improving their overall experiences.

In the United States, visa restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles hinder international graduates from securing employment, undermining global competitiveness. Addressing these issues is vital to filling labor shortages, especially in STEM fields, where the United States is projected to face a deficit of 1.4 million workers by 2030 (Chase & Miles, 2023). Although the OPT program allows students to gain work experience in the United States after graduation, they encounter challenges in receiving work authorization in time and securing job offers within the limited time frame established by the program. Upon completing the OPT, they also face the uncertainty of the H-1B visa lottery.

In Canada, international graduate students expressed overall satisfaction with the PGWPP, a key factor in attracting them to the country. Maintaining a favorable policy environment will be crucial for sustaining Canada's appeal to international students. Despite their satisfaction, students faced challenges in securing employment post-graduation.

Depending on the issue identified in each country, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. U.S. policymakers should simplify the OPT application process to reduce bureaucratic hurdles. Adopting an approach similar to Canada, where students can start working immediately after submitting their applications, would help alleviate delays and lessen the financial burden of expedited filing fees. Additionally, the OPT validity period should begin on the first day of employment instead of the approval date. Extending the OPT duration to 36 months for all majors and eliminating the 90-day unemployment limit would give students more time to find meaningful employment. Eliminating the reapplication process for STEM graduates after one year would also help streamline the system by reducing the extra paperwork and the uncertainty around students' ability to continue employment. Lowering OPT application fees would ease financial pressures and enhance accessibility to the program.
2. Increasing the number of H-1B visas and eliminating employer sponsorship requirements are vital for meeting labor market demands and motivating companies to hire international graduates. Creating a new visa category based on Canada's Experience Class, which includes a points-based system, could prioritize graduates from U.S. institutions for work visas and provide a more straightforward path to permanent residency.
3. Additionally, allowing part-time, off-campus employment during studies without impacting OPT duration would enable students to acquire valuable work experience and develop their professional networks.

4. Policymakers in Canada should thoughtfully evaluate any modifications to the PGWPP, as most students interviewed expressed satisfaction with its existing requirements. Preserving the program's flexibility and accessibility will help ensure that Canada continues to be an appealing destination for international students.

Employers

Employers in the United States and Canada avoid navigating visa-related complexities and administrative burdens, excluding international graduates from the hiring pool. However, international students have demonstrated that they are achievement-oriented, highly skilled in fields that local employers need, and interculturally competent and adaptable. Retaining this talent is a benefit that employers should actively pursue.

5. Employers should advocate to national policymakers for streamlining the hiring process for international graduates. Rather than shying away from foreign talent due to visa-related challenges, employers should highlight the effects of immigration policies on local businesses and the broader economy. The STEM sector serves as a prime example, where organizations struggle to find enough domestic workers while also facing challenges in retaining foreign-born talent due to visa issues and restrictions (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2024).
6. Employers should partner with higher education institutions to improve their understanding of the legal options for hiring international students. These collaborations can involve being open to learning about post-study work program requirements and offering internships and co-op opportunities to provide international students with practical experience and networking opportunities.

Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions should recognize that international graduate students value the education provided in the United States and Canada but often struggle with the high costs of education and living in North America. Access to funding is a critical factor when choosing host institutions. Despite their interest in career opportunities post-graduation, many students encounter challenges accessing the workforce and are often unprepared for the job search. These dissatisfactions may lead to decreased enrollment, especially when other countries offer more favorable options for education and employment. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed:

7. Institutions should enhance their reputation and attract more international students by addressing students' financial and employment challenges, such as providing additional funding opportunities or reevaluating tuition fees.
8. Institutions should also include comprehensive information about post-study work programs in their recruitment practices, considering the significant impact these opportunities have on student mobility decisions.
9. Institutions should provide tailored career services for international students, including workshops on job application processes, resume building, interview preparation, work authorization policies, and strategies for navigating cultural differences during the job search. Career support services should also integrate technology to help students effectively use application tracking systems.
10. Finally, institutions should partner with employers to educate them on PSWP requirements and create internships and co-op programs to offer students practical experience and networking opportunities. More importantly, they should advocate for

policy reforms to enhance post-study work programs, further supporting international students' transitions into the workforce.

International Graduate Students

Studying abroad is a major life decision that requires careful consideration. Various factors drive students to pursue this opportunity and often influence their choices of destinations. Regardless of their financial capabilities, the expenses associated with education and living in North America can be challenging for international graduate students. Therefore,

11. Students should thoroughly research funding options and living expenses before deciding on a host country.

Establishing a career in the host nation can be challenging or straightforward, depending on the requirements of the post-study work program and immigration policies. It is crucial to understand post-study work opportunities, employment options, and immigration pathways to achieve career aspirations and avoid potential pitfalls.

12. Students should proactively utilize campus career services, networking opportunities, and internships during their studies to prepare for employment. Those studying in the United States should consider processing delays and the numerous requirements of the OPT program to enhance their chances of successfully transitioning to employment within the stipulated deadlines.
13. Prospective international students motivated by career opportunities in the United States, Canada, or elsewhere should carefully compare their options before selecting a study destination. They must ensure they choose a country with favorable policies to align with their academic and career goals.

Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the valuable findings from this study, additional research is required to investigate the mobility drivers of international graduate students to the United States and Canada and capture their experiences with PSWPs. Future investigations should build on these insights to produce further findings. I interviewed only 11 participants: seven in the United States and four in Canada. Future studies should involve more participants and institutions. A quantitative approach may yield generalizable insights into the factors influencing the choice of study destinations.

Researchers should also examine recent changes to Canada's international education policies, including the cap on study permits and adjustments to PGWPP eligibility (IRCC, 2024). It is necessary to understand how these policies impact students' decisions to study in Canada and their post-graduation opportunities in the host country. Additionally, examining the reasons that attract international undergraduates and their experiences with post-study employment in both countries and comparing their outcomes to graduate students would offer a deeper understanding of student mobility.

PSWPs around the globe are a topic of growing importance. More research is needed on these programs in other nations, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, as well as in emerging destinations like China and Japan. Such research could offer valuable insights into how international students navigate employment opportunities in different contexts, the strengths and weaknesses of various programs, and their influence on mobility to these study destinations.

Employers play a considerable role in the success or failure of PSWPs. They facilitate the entry of international graduates into the labor force. It is urgent to understand their perspectives on hiring international graduates through temporary post-study work programs. It would also be

important to investigate the challenges and opportunities employers face. Such findings can determine the effectiveness of these programs. Furthermore, it would be important to compare the long-term career outcomes of international students who complete the OPT with those of PGWPP participants. Analyzing the support mechanisms that universities put in place to assist international graduates in transitioning to employment would uncover the most effective strategies for meeting their unique needs.

Conclusion

This study examined the mobility drivers of international graduate students to Canada and the United States, identifying significant differences between the two countries. While both are top destinations for international education, the findings indicate that Canada's favorable immigration and employment policies provided a distinct advantage. Students considered studying in Canada a more straightforward pathway to long-term residency, significantly influencing their choice of Canada over the United States. Although funding opportunities and the potential for better job prospects were acknowledged as compelling reasons for studying in the United States, the complexities of the OPT and H-1B visa processes overshadowed those benefits.

The study also examined students' employment experiences after graduation and found differences between the two countries. Participants in Canada expressed optimism and confidence regarding their career prospects as they perceived the clear pathway to permanent residency provided through the PGWPP. In contrast, students in the United States expressed feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, largely because of the lack of employer sponsorship for the H-1B visa and its unpredictable outcomes. These findings highlight the need for policy reforms in the United States, where dissatisfaction with the OPT requirements was particularly

pronounced. They align with the concerns raised by Khanal and Gaulee (2019), who argued that restrictive immigration and employment policies often hinder international students' aspirations to build careers in their host countries.

As global competition for talent grows, Canada and the United States must reassess how they cater to the needs of international graduate students. Trevena (2019) stated that many countries have adopted post-study work programs to attract international students and retain highly skilled graduates. To remain competitive, Canada and the United States must recognize that international graduate students prioritize the quality of education in their study destinations, but more importantly, they are interested in career opportunities. While participants in this study expressed satisfaction with the PGWPP, Canada has recently introduced stricter immigration policies, including caps on study permits and a reduction in the proportion of temporary residents (IRCC, 2024). These changes will likely affect how future international graduate students perceive studying and working in Canada, especially considering statements from the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, suggesting that not everyone who wishes to come to Canada or remain there will be able to do so (IRCC, 2024). This policy shift may have significant implications for the international student experience in Canada moving forward.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

QUALTRICS FORM COLLECTING DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FROM PARTICIPANTS (UNITED STATES)

Appendix A

Qualtrics Form Collecting Demographic Information from Participants (United States)

By filling out this form, you are expressing your interest in participating in the following study, which aims to understand why you chose to study in the United States. Additionally, you will share your experiences navigating employment under the Optional Practical Training (OPT). Your participation will involve responding to a series of questions the researcher will ask you during an online interview. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes and will be conducted via Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

If the researcher selects you to participate, you allow them to contact you to arrange an interview date. You may also be contacted later for a 45-minute follow-up interview to review your interview transcript, indicate whether it reflects what you shared, and provide any additional thoughts you wish to share.

1) Name:
2) Gender:
3) Age:
4) Country of origin:
5) Major:
6) Level of study:
    - Master's
    - PhD
7) The institution where you earned or are currently earning your graduate degree
8) Where did you earn your undergraduate degree?
    - In my home country
    - In the host country
    - In another country. Please specify:
9) Are you currently working under OPT?
    - Yes
    - No
10) If you answered **NO** to question 9, have you officially applied for the OPT?
    - Yes
    - No
11) If you haven't graduated yet, when is your expected graduation date?
12) Contact information:
    Phone number:
    Email address:

APPENDIX B

QUALTRICS FORM COLLECTING DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FROM PARTICIPANTS (CANADA)

Appendix B

Qualtrics Form Collecting Demographic Information from Participants (Canada)

By filling out this form, you are expressing your interest in participating in the following study, which aims to understand why you chose to study in Canada. Additionally, you will share your experiences navigating employment under the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP). Your participation will involve responding to a series of questions the researcher will ask you during an online interview. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes and will be conducted via Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

If the researcher selects you to participate, you allow them to contact you to arrange an interview date. You may also be contacted later for a 45-minute follow-up interview to review your interview transcript, indicate whether it reflects what you shared, and provide any additional thoughts you wish to share.

1) Name:
2) Gender:
3) Age:
4) Country of origin:
5) Major:
6) Level of study:
    - Master's
    - PhD
7) The institution where you earned or are currently earning your graduate degree
8) Where did you earn your undergraduate degree?
    - In my home country
    - In the host country
    - In another country. Please specify:
9) Are you currently working under the PGWPP?
    - Yes
    - No
10) If you answered **NO** to question 9, have you officially applied for the PGWPP?
11) Contact information:
    phone number
    Email address

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (U.S.) VERSION

Appendix C
Interview Protocol (U.S.) Version

This study aims to explore and understand the factors that attracted you to the United States to earn your graduate degree. Additionally, I want to learn about your experience transitioning from student to worker through the Optional Practical Training (OPT) Program. I will start by asking you questions to gather background information about you. After that, we will move on to the section discussing the motivating factors that influenced your decision to study in the United States We will conclude the interview with your experiences and perspective on navigating employment under the OPT.

Section I: Background Information

1) Can you introduce yourself?
- Name
- Age
- Country of origin
- Major
- Level of study

2) Can you tell me about your undergraduate education?
- Where did you complete your undergraduate education?
- When did you finish your undergraduate education?
- What did you do after completing your undergraduate degree and before starting your graduate program?

Section II: Motivating Factors for Studying in The United States

This section allows us to explore why you chose to study in the United States. I want to understand the reasons that influenced your choice of study destination and brought you to this country for your graduate degree.

3) At what point in your life did you consider leaving your country to study in a different one, and why?
4) Among all the countries hosting international students, what led you to study and earn your graduate degree in the United States?
- What different factors drew you to this country for your graduate education?
- What role, if any, did the program of study have in attracting you to this country?
- What role, if any, did the institution play in your decision to come here?
- Would you have chosen a different institution?
- How did you fund your studies?
- How significant was the cost factor in selecting the United States as your study destination?
- What impact, if any, have future employment opportunities in the United States had on your decision to study here?
- Did anyone influence or guide your choice to come to the United States for your studies?
- Among all the factors you mentioned today, which was the most influential in your choice of study destination, and why?

5) What other country would you have chosen if you hadn't made it to the United States, and why?
6) How does earning a degree from this country compare to getting one in your home country?

7) Is there anything else you want to share about why the United States was your top choice for studying abroad?

Section III: Perspectives and Experiences Navigating Post-Study Work Programs

This section will focus on your perspectives and experiences navigating employment under the OPT. I want to learn more about your experience transitioning from student to employee in your study destination using the OPT.

8) When did you graduate, or when will you graduate?
9) At what point in your academic journey did you begin considering working in the United States under the OPT?
10) How long have you been working under the OPT? (Only for those currently employed).
11) Could you explain the process for obtaining work authorization in the United States after graduation?

- When did you begin working on the application process to secure work authorization?
- Since you can apply for OPT 90 days before graduation and no later than 60 days after graduation, has the application deadline ever challenged you?
- How and where do you submit your application?
- What is the application fee, and has that ever been a challenge for you?
- What are the requirements of the OPT program?
- What type of employment are you authorized to perform under the OPT?
- Where in the country are you permitted to work under the OPT?
- Can you start working while waiting for the decision on the application?
- Where do you find assistance and guidance while navigating the OPT?
- How long can you work in the United States under the OPT?
- Is your spouse or common-law partner permitted to work under your OPT?

12) Could you share your experience looking for employment?

- What has helped?
- What challenges have you faced when seeking employment under the OPT?
- How do employers respond when they know you are on OPT?
- How do you manage travel outside the country while on OPT?
- What opportunities does working under the OPT provide you?

13) What do you envision for the future post-OPT?
14) What else would you like to share about your experience with the OPT?
15) Any advice for other international students or recommendations for policymakers designing the program?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (CANADA) VERSION

Appendix D
Interview Protocol (Canada) Version

This study aims to explore and understand the factors that attracted you to Canada to earn your graduate degree. Additionally, I want to learn about your experience transitioning from student to worker through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP). I will start by asking you questions to gather background information about you. After that, we will move on to the section discussing the motivating factors that influenced your decision to study in Canada. We will conclude the interview with your experiences and perspective on navigating employment under the PGWPP.

Section I: Background Information

1) Can you introduce yourself?
- Name
- Age
- Country of origin
- Major
- Level of study

2) Can you tell me about your undergraduate education?
- Where did you complete your undergraduate education?
- When did you finish your undergraduate education?
- What did you do after completing your undergraduate degree and before starting your graduate program?

Section II: Motivating Factors for Studying in Canada

This section allows us to explore why you chose to study in Canada. I want to understand the reasons that influenced your choice of study destination and brought you to this country for your graduate degree.

3) At what point in your life did you consider leaving your country to study in a different one, and why?
4) Among all the countries hosting international students, what led you to study and earn your graduate degree in Canada?
- What different factors drew you to this country for your graduate education?
- What role, if any, did the program of study have in attracting you to this country?
- What role, if any, did the institution play in your decision to come here?
- Would you have chosen a different institution?
- How did you fund your studies?
- How significant was the cost factor in selecting Canada as your study destination?
- What impact, if any, have future employment opportunities in Canada had on your decision to study here?
- Did anyone influence or guide you to come to Canada for your studies?
- Among all the factors you mentioned today, which was the most influential in your choice of study destination, and why?

5) What other country would you have chosen if you hadn't made it to Canada, and why?
6) How does earning a degree from this country compare to getting one in your home country?
7) Is there anything else you want to share about why Canada was your top choice for studying abroad?

Section III: Perspectives and Experiences Navigating Post-Study Work Programs

This section will focus on your perspectives and experiences navigating employment under the PGWPP. I want to learn more about your experience transitioning from student to employee in your study destination using the PGWPP.

8) When did you graduate?
9) At what point in your academic journey did you begin considering working in Canada under the PGWPP?
10) How long have you been working under the PGWPP? (Only for those currently employed).
11) Could you explain the process for obtaining work authorization in Canada after graduation?

- When did you begin working on the application process to secure work authorization?
- Since you can apply for PGWPP up to 180 days after graduation, has the application deadline ever challenged you?
- How and where do you submit your application?
- What is the application fee, and has that ever been a challenge for you?
- What are the requirements of the PGWPP program?
- What type of employment are you authorized to perform under the PGWPP?
- Where in the country are you permitted to work under the PGWPP?
- Can you start working while waiting for the decision on the application?
- Where do you find assistance and guidance while navigating the PGWPP?
- How long can you work in Canada under the PGWPP?
- Is your spouse or common-law partner permitted to work under your PGWPP?

12) Could you share your experience looking for employment?

- What has helped?
- What challenges have you faced when seeking employment under the PGWPP?
- How do employers respond when they know you are on PGWPP?
- How do you manage travel outside the country while on PGWPP?
- What opportunities does working under the PGWPP provide you?

13) What do you envision for the future post-PGWPP?
14) What else would you like to share about your experience with the PGWPP?
15) Any advice for other international students or recommendations for policymakers designing the program?

APPENDIX E

EMAIL TEMPLATE FOR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS (U.S.) VERSION

Appendix E
Email Template for Prospective Participants (U.S.) Version

Dear _____,

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this qualitative study as part of my doctoral dissertation. I am truly grateful for your contribution to this project.
I am conducting this study to determine the factors that influence international graduate students' decisions to pursue a graduate degree in the United States. I am also interested in your perspective and experience working in the United States through the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. Therefore, I eagerly look forward to interviewing you and learning more about your experience.

Please let me know what time works best for you. I will then schedule the meeting on Zoom and send you a link. Our interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes.
If you have not done it yet, could you please take a few minutes to complete this brief questionnaire to introduce yourself to me for the research? https://tinyurl.com/----------

Thank you once again in advance for your participation.
If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,
_____

APPENDIX F

EMAIL TEMPLATE FOR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS (CANADA) VERSION

Appendix F
Email Template for Prospective Participants (Canada) Version

Dear _____,

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in the qualitative study as part of my doctoral dissertation. I am truly grateful for your contribution to this project.
I am conducting this study to determine the factors that influence international graduate students' decisions to pursue a graduate degree in Canada. I am also interested in your perspective and experience working in Canada through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP). Therefore, I eagerly look forward to interviewing you and learning more about your experience.

Please let me know what time works best for you. I will then schedule the meeting on Zoom and send you a link. Our interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes.
If you have not done it yet, could you please take a few minutes to complete this brief questionnaire to introduce yourself to me for the research? https://tinyurl.com/----------

Thank you once again in advance for your participation.
If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,
_____

APPENDIX G

SNOWBALL EMAIL TEMPLATE (U.S.) VERSION

Appendix G
Snowball Email Template (U.S.) Version

Dear ----------,

Thank you for participating in my study and sharing your motivations for pursuing graduate education in the United States and your experiences with the Optional Practical Training (OPT). Your insights are valuable and significantly contribute to this research.

I hope you can help recruit other potential participants who can provide insights on this topic. Please share the study details with international graduates navigating the OPT in the United States. Graduate students with a master's or Ph.D. in STEM or non-STEM fields are invited to participate if they are employed or seeking employment under the OPT.

Participants will complete a brief online questionnaire (5 to 10 minutes) before an online interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, potentially followed by a 45-minute follow-up interview at a later date. All interviews will be conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participation is voluntary, and no compensation will be offered. Nonetheless, the insights gained will benefit international students, policymakers, and higher education institutions.

Interested participants can access the questionnaire at _____. They can also reach me directly at _____ or by email at _____@kent.edu. Thank you for helping to spread the word about this study. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

Best regards,

_____

APPENDIX H

SNOWBALL EMAIL TEMPLATE (CANADA) VERSION

Appendix H
Snowball Email Template (Canada) Version

Dear ----------,

Thank you for participating in my study and sharing your motivations for pursuing graduate education in Canada and your experiences with the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP). Your insights are valuable and significantly contribute to this research.

I hope you can help recruit other potential participants who can provide insights on this topic. Please share the study details with international graduates navigating the PGWPP in Canada. Graduates with a master's or Ph.D. in STEM or non-STEM fields are invited to participate if they are employed or seeking employment under the PGWPP.

Participants will complete a brief online questionnaire (5 to 10 minutes) before an online interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, potentially followed by a 45-minute follow-up interview at a later date. All interviews will be conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participation is voluntary, and no compensation will be offered. Nonetheless, the insights gained will benefit international students, policymakers, and higher education institutions.

Interested participants can access the questionnaire at _____. They can also reach me directly at _____ or by email at _____@kent.edu. Thank you for helping to spread the word about this study. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

Best regards,

_____

APPENDIX I

EMAIL TEMPLATE FOR STAFF MEMBERS AT CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL OFFICES

Appendix I
Email Template for Staff Members at Canadian International Offices

Subject: Seeking International Graduate Students for Research Study Participation

Dear ……...,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Abdoulaye Fall, and I am a doctoral candidate at Kent State University. I am reaching out to request your assistance in recruiting former international students in Canada as research participants for my doctoral study. The study has been approved by Kent State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact them at 330-672-2704.

Under the guidance of Dr. Martha Merrill, I am conducting this research to understand the reasons influencing international graduate students' decisions to pursue master's or Ph.D. degrees in the United States and Canada. I am also exploring their experiences as they transition to employment after graduation, particularly through post-study work programs such as the Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States and the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) in Canada.

I am currently seeking interviews with former international graduate students (master's and Ph.D. only) who have applied for the PGWPP or those currently employed in Canada under the PGWPP.

I kindly request your assistance in sharing this recruitment email with your international student listservs and colleagues who work with international students. The recruitment flyer is attached to this email. Interested participants can scan the QR code or follow the link to a brief Qualtrics survey that gathers demographic information. After that, we will reach out to them to schedule an online interview.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at _____. I greatly appreciate your help in spreading the word about this research.
Best regards,

APPENDIX J

FLYER: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS (U.S. VERSION)

Appendix J
Flyer: Call for Participants (U.S. Version)

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: SELECTION OF STUDY DESTINATIONS, STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING POST-STUDY WORK PROGRAMS

ATTENTION TO ALL INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE US! (MASTER'S & PHD)

You are invited to participate in a research study

- Are you an F-1 visa holder?
- Have you applied for the Optional Practical Training(OPT)
  OR
- Are you currently employed in the United States under the **OPT**?

If so, we want to hear from you! We are conducting a qualitative study to explore:
a) The rationales behind your choice to earn your graduate degree in the United States.
b) Your experience working or seeking employment under the Optional Practical Training.

Your insights and experiences will give us a better understanding of the factors that motivate international graduate students to select the United States as a study destination and the experiences of the students who navigate employment under the OPT.

Your participation in this study will not only benefit our research but also provide a platform for you to share your perspectives.
You will be asked to complete a short online questionnaire (5-10 minutes) and participate in a 60 to 90-minute online interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams.
If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, it is expected to last 45 minutes.

Scan here to complete the questionnaire

OR

Follow this link: https://tinyurl.com/4ca4nhjn

The researcher will contact you via email or phone to schedule an interview.
We look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your time and contribution to this study. Thank you very much!

The study is approved by the Kent State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any questions or concerns can be directed to them at 330-672-2704

APPENDIX K

FLYER: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS (CANADA VERSION)

Appendix K
Flyer: Call for Participants (Canada Version)

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: SELECTION OF STUDY DESTINATIONS, STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING POST-STUDY WORK PROGRAMS

ATTENTION TO ALL INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES IN CANADA! (MASTER'S & PHD)

You are invited to participate in a research study

- Are you a former international student who completed a graduate degree in Canada?
- Have you applied for the **Post-Graduation Work Permit Program** (PGWPP?
- Are you looking for employment under the **PGWPP** or currently employed under the **PGWPP**?

If so, we want to hear from you! We are conducting a qualitative study to explore:
a) The rationales behind your choice to earn your graduate degree in Canada.
b) Your experience working or seeking employment using your Post-Graduation Work Permit

Your insights and experiences will give us a better understanding of the factors that motivate international graduate students to select Canada as a study destination and the experiences of the students who navigate employment under the PGWPP.

Your participation in this study will not only benefit our research but also provide a platform for you to share your perspectives.
You will be asked to complete a short online questionnaire (5-10 minutes) and participate in a 60 to 90-minute online interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams.
If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, it is expected to last 45 minutes.

Scan here to complete the questionnaire

OR

Follow this link:https://tinyurl.com/2p9xvza2

The researcher will contact you via email or phone to schedule an interview.
We look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your time and contribution to this study. Thank you very much!

The study is approved by the Kent State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any questions or concerns can be directed to them at 330-672-2704

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