

Graduate Outcomes of College International Students Returning Home

Navigating career and reintegration in the home country

Introduction

International student mobility has expanded dramatically over recent decades, with many students pursuing overseas education to enhance their skills, improve career prospects, and, in some cases, pursue immigration pathways (Pham, 2011; ICEF Monitor, 2019). While significant attention has been given to the experiences of international students during study and in host-country labour markets, relatively little research examines what happens when these students return home, especially in the Canadian context.

Research on international student returnees highlights both the advantages of global competencies and the barriers posed by undervalued credentials, rigid organizational cultures, and mismatched labour market expectations. Studies (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Tran & Bui, 2021) emphasize the negotiated nature of employability, shaped by both individual agency and structural conditions. Typologies of returnee strategies (Pham & Saito, 2019) underscore diverse adaptations, though always within constrained contexts. Yet, existing work largely focuses on university graduates, particularly in Asia. Little is known about Canadian-educated *college graduates* and how they leverage their credentials upon returning to their home countries. Accordingly, this study examines how international college graduates returning from Canada navigate labour market reintegration and mobilize their educational capital in home-country contexts.

Research Rationale & Significance

The dynamics of return migration, often termed “reverse mobility” (Lee & Kim, 2010), are becoming increasingly significant. Countries like China, India, and the Philippines are witnessing large numbers of returnees as domestic economies grow and offer expanding professional opportunities. In China alone, over half a million students returned in 2019, while recent data suggests a majority of Indian students abroad are now returning, drawn by entrepreneurship and professional prospects.

While Canadian policy positions international students as long-term contributors through post-graduation work permits and pathways to permanent residency (Arthur & Nunes, 2014), not all students remain. Community colleges, in particular, have grown as destinations for international students, yet their mandate and curricula are oriented toward Canadian labour markets. This raises crucial questions: How relevant are Canadian college credentials in home labor markets? How do graduates mobilize these resources when reintegrating professionally? Thus, this research fills three gaps: (1) the limited focus on college-level graduates as opposed to university graduates, (2) the underrepresentation of returnees in

Canadian international education research, and the need to examine the perceived value of Canadian credentials in home country contexts.

This study contributes to international education research by providing empirical accounts of Canadian college graduates' post-return employability trajectories. The findings will inform how colleges design programs that prepare international students not only for host-country employment, but also for reintegration into diverse global labour markets.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary frameworks. First, Tomlinson's Graduate Capital Mode, which conceptualizes employability through five forms of capital: human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological. This lens illuminates how graduates mobilize resources and strategies when navigating labour markets. Second, Bourdieu's Theory of Social Practice – emphasizing habitus, capital, and field- this framework helps explain how international credentials are differently valued across national contexts, and how structural power relations shape returnees' employability. Together, these frameworks provide a nuanced account of how returnees negotiate the interplay between agency and structure in their career reintegration.

Methodology

The study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. An online survey of approximately 100 returnees will identify patterns in employment outcomes and perceived credential value. This is followed by semi-structured interviews to explore how graduates interpret and navigate these experiences. Quantitative data will be analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data will be analyzed thematically.

The project has already been approved by the Ethics Review Board (ERB) of Humber College. Data collection is ongoing till the end of February, with preliminary findings expected by July 2026. We anticipate being able to present emerging themes and patterns at the conference in September 2026.

Conclusion

International education is often framed as a passport to global opportunity. Yet for many graduates, especially from colleges, reintegration at home is a complex and negotiated process. This ongoing study sheds light on how returnees navigate labour markets, reposition their Canadian credentials, and adapt to local structures. By unpacking these dynamics, the research contributes to comparative and international education scholarship and to broader debates on graduate employability and transnational mobility.

This study aligns closely with the conference theme, "*Bridging Culture, Co-creating Knowledge*," as it explores the experiences of international graduates reintegrating into their home country's labour markets. By highlighting how returnees navigate employment

pathways, the study offers insights that can inform a re-examination of Canadian colleges' internationalization agendas - particularly the extent to which they prepare graduates for global, rather than solely local, employability. This is especially relevant in light of ongoing policy changes in international education in Canada, which are reshaping the expectations and opportunities for both students and institutions.