

## New submission from ARC Award Final Report

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To:Scholarly Activity <scholarlyactivity@langara.ca>

### **Name of Researcher**

Jenny Francis

### **Department/Faculty**

Geography

### **Position in Department/Faculty**

Instructor

### **Project Title**

Educaation, Employment & Immigration Pathways of International Students in Urban and Rural BC: Reducing the Gaps between Opportunity & Responsibility

### **Term of Project**

Sept 2020-Dec 2023

### **Please introduce yourself – include pertinent background information relating to the topic of your research project.**

Dr Jenny Francis is the Project Director and an Instructor in the Department of Geography at Langara College, Vancouver BC. Her current project investigating education, employment and immigration pathways of urban and rural international students on the study-work-stay pathway in BC is funded by a \$360,000 SSHRC grant, as well as \$3000 from ARC Fund to support the presentation of results at the Metropolis conference in Ottawa in March 2023. She is particularly interested in how "edugration" processes are impacting international students and their families, how federal and provincial policy can produce more socially just outcomes, as well as how international student flows are changing the Canadian post-secondary landscape at the college level. Her previous research focused on the experiences of refugees in Canada, especially around housing, social welfare, access to social services, and interaction with the criminal justice system.

### **Please discuss your educational background and your work experience that led you to taking on this research project. If possible, include a quote that helps define your interest in this project.**

Jenny Francis completed her PhD at UBC under supervisor, Dr. Dan Hiebert, in 2016. Her dissertation looked at the experiences of refugee youth in the Canadian criminal justice system. Her MA, also with Dr Hiebert, looking at the housing situation for African refugees in Metro Vancouver, was completed in 2009. Her research and publications have explored the intersections of immigration with other policy fields, including housing, education, social welfare, criminal justice, and diverse issues related to settlement and integration in Canada. In addition to community-based migration research, her professional experience includes preparing country condition reports for refugee claims, providing employment and settlement services to newcomers, training library staff in settlement and integration, policy analysis, research program coordination, grant writing, teaching human geography and public policy, and serving as an editor on the board of a scholarly journal.

### **Please summarize your project in plain language that others not in your field could understand.**

The purpose of the 3-year study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is to investigate and improve outcomes for international students (IS) along the Study-Work-Stay pathway with the goal of

aligning student intent with government and post-secondary institutional policy and the resources available to support students, including after graduation. International students study in Canadian colleges, work, and graduate with hopes to stay in Canada. Our study explores what is happening along the study, work, stay pathway with attention to the programs students enter and their employment outcomes.

The project is led by researchers at Langara College in Vancouver and the College of New Caledonia (CNC) in Prince George, along with community partners, Prince George Immigrant and Multicultural Service Society (IMSS), and South Vancouver Neighbourhood House (SVNH). Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is also a partner on the project.

**Identify the project goals and objectives. Explain how the results may be used to solve a problem or inform further research in the field.**

The study investigates international student experiences and outcomes along the Study–Work–Stay pathway to bring policy, student intent, and reality into closer alignment, enable more students to achieve success as they define it, reduce the gaps between opportunity and responsibility for students, PSIs, employers, and policy makers.

In 2021, more than 721,000 international students in Canada contributed an estimated \$21.6 billion to Canada's GDP and supported almost 170,000 jobs for Canada's middle class. There are over 155,000 international students in British Columbia (BC), with college enrollment growing at the fastest rate among institutional types (StatsCan 2022). Yet little is known about the immigration pathways of international students (IS). Moreover, most research focuses on students enrolled at a university; what happens to the less publicized—and less visible—international students studying in the lower echelons of the academic hierarchy in colleges and in smaller urban centers? We know some people are successful in achieving their intended study, employment, and immigration outcomes while others are not, but what is happening on the ground?

There is little research on international undergraduate students' experiences from their own perspectives, particularly for students from Asia. Moreover, there is a need for more research on challenges that IS face as they transition from student to worker. An essential knowledge gap exists where the priorities of educational programs, community supports, and immigration policy converge with those of IS in currently unknown ways to create particular status pathways. What is needed to support student success? Because research on how policy mediates international students' objectives with institutional resources is missing, our understanding of the work-study-stay transition is incomplete. It is here that the current study builds on and expands current knowledge by exploring the migration, employment, and education status pathways of urban and rural international students in BC.

The aim is to paint a new and detailed picture of the current landscape and to propose innovative solutions to bring into closer alignment policy, reality, and intent in ways that benefit all stakeholders, including current and former study permit holders, Canadian society, policy makers, educational institutions, and local communities. The federal government is providing visas to international students in hopes that they will provide a pool of skilled labour and also integrate smoothly into the Canadian labour market. Although 60-90% of IS intended to apply for PR, Statistics

Canada (2022) estimates only 30% of undergraduate IS become PRs within 10 years. What is the reason some students apply for work permits while others do not—was that their intention, or did something go wrong? We also know some students stay while others return home, even after applying for a work permit. Why is this happening? Without that information governments and institutions cannot create effective policy or even evaluate current programs. Comprehending the challenges and supports that exist for different stakeholders along diverse policy and status pathways is as much a matter of equity and social justice as it is a policy and program imperative to ensure effective decision making.

The objectives are to provide a preliminary systematic overview of IS educational, employment, and immigration pathways, to enhance empirical and conceptual understandings of their experiences, and create solutions to improve outcomes for all stakeholders, including study partners. The ultimate goal is to bring intent, policy and available supports into closer alignment so that more students achieve success, whatever that means to them. To achieve this objective, the research questions seek to identify what is working and what is not working in terms of providing strategic supports and policy frameworks to meet the needs of different stakeholders, and to propose innovative alternatives.

**Briefly explain the steps taken (methods used) to conduct the research, and describe the key findings.**

## METHODS

Data collection consists of a survey of current and former international students at postsecondary institutions in Prince George and Metro Vancouver, followed by interviews and focus groups with international students and professional stakeholders who work with IS in various capacities. We completed the survey portion in spring 2021, with 1,300 international students providing information on their experiences related to education, employment, housing, immigration and personal wellbeing. The 1300 respondents represent an approximately 15% response rate. We distributed nearly 7000 survey invitations to CNC and Langara students based on a random representative sample based on three criteria: country/region of origin, program of study, college (CNC or Langara). In addition, we concluded 38 interviews with current and former IS as well as 49 interviews with professional people whose work involves international education in some way. IS interviewees were drawn from survey respondents who indicated an interest in taking part in a follow up interview. The sampling and statistical analysis was led by Dr Albert Wong, an instructor in Langara Math & Statistics, as well as Langara Stats students working under his supervision.

The study involves some limitations. Due to the length of the survey, only students with strong English ability would have completed it. Similarly, students who did not feel comfortable conducting an interview in English would not have agreed to an interview. Further, our study could not capture students who were in detention, deported, were working many hours per week, had become homeless, depressed or committed suicide. Therefore, the experiences of the most marginalised students were most likely left out of the study.

Knowledge dissemination included the following activities.

## PRESENTATIONS

Langara College, June 2021

College of New Caledonia, Prince George (PG), May 2022

AMSSA BCSIS Working Group, March 2023

Metropolis Conference, Vancouver, March 2022

P2P (Pathways to Prosperity) Conference, April 2023

Canadian Bureau for Intl Education (CBIE), Ottawa, Nov 2022

Metropolis Conference, Ottawa, March 2023

IRCC Research Matters, May 2023

College of New Caledonia, PG, Oct 2023

Langara College, June 2022

Langara College, Feb 2023

Langara College, March 2023

South Vancouver Neighbourhood House, Oct 2023

Immigrant & Multicultural Services Society, PG, Oct 2023

University of Northern British Columbia, March 2023

#### BRIEFING MEETINGS & DISCUSSIONS

Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training

Ministry of Municipal Affairs Immigrant Integration

Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada

#### POLICY BRIEF SUBMISSIONS

Provincial –AEST (fall 2023)

Federal –IRCC (fall 2023)

Will be posted on UBC CMS and project websites

WEBSITE (Comprehensive Final Report)

Launching fall 2023

PUBLICATIONS (aiming for publication in 2024) on

International Students' Mental health

Housing and International Students

Neoliberalism & International Education

Gender & South Asian IS

## FINDINGS

Our findings highlight student experiences in urban and rural contexts in BC, and how stakeholders including post secondary professionals, policy makers, employers, consultants, and students themselves can support holistic, ethical pathways that reduce the gaps between opportunity and responsibility. These findings will inform institutional, government, and community programming and policy to better meet the needs of IS so they are successful in what they want to achieve with respect to education, employment, and immigration status.

Specifically, we find there is a mismatch among the primary goals of PSIs (growing enrolment to replace dwindling provincial funding), IS (migration), employers (source of low wage workers), and the federal government (attract the best and brightest to the Canadian labour market). College recruitment has become a runaway train due to a focus on enrolment numbers over student success and overreliance on education agents whose focus is profit; our study points to the problems faced by young students who are not academically prepared for success in college and cannot afford to live in BC (evidenced in their reliance on foodbanks for example). Financial difficulties stood out in our research among students, while professional stakeholders emphasized low levels of English and lack of academic preparedness that inhibits academic success and leaves IS vulnerable to fraud and exploitation by unscrupulous employers and immigration consultants. Allowing financially strapped students whose objectives are employment and migration rather than education to work unlimited hours further undermines academic achievement. Facing academic challenges, financial strain, and family pressure, alongside severe challenges to mental wellbeing, education becomes just one small piece of the pie for many college-level IS. Meanwhile, according to interviewees, the quality of Canadian education is being eroded, negatively impacting experiences for domestic students and for academically strong IS who came to Canada expecting to receive a high-quality international education (IE).

In our study, Langara students tended to be younger than at CNC and less likely to have completed a degree previously; CNC markets PDD programs to IS while Langara promotes their Associates Degree. In fact, many IS transfer into a General Education Diploma once at Langara. This qualification only requires 60 credits at any level and does not prepare students for the labour market. There is a disconnect between the programs our respondents are taking in college, their career paths, and their migration objectives; and the reality is a 2-year diploma will not qualify a 19-year-old for the NOC positions required during the PGWP as a condition of PR. CNC graduates were more likely to find work in their field than those from Langara, but struggled to find work in their region. Only 5% of respondents indicated an intention to remain in Canada temporarily, yet openings in EE or PNP are limited; it is unclear what happens to the 70% of undergraduates who do not transition to PR, although it appears many in BC obtain multiple consecutive work permits.

Eighty percent of our respondents reported earning minimum wage or less. IS and PGWP holders need assistance to enter the labour market, but as TRs, they do not qualify for IRCC-funded settlement services or WorkBC employment services, while public colleges tend to focus on education rather than careers. The impact of low wage TFWs on the labour market is to depress wages; this works well for employers but is not beneficial to the Canadian economy or workers generally. For graduates, long term temporary status creates uncertainty and inhibits access to needed services, good quality housing, and decent employment.

The policy field is fragmented and confused. If IE is meant to be an export industry, then the number of IS in Canada should continue to grow; but if the focus of IE is education and integration into the Canadian labour market, then we should select only the best and brightest. It is not clear which direction Canada is going, but maintaining a strong position in the competition for international talent requires investment in services to IS.

Based on these findings, we provide the following conclusions. 1. STUDY? Academic achievement is not the major concern for most IS in our survey, underscoring the importance of migration and economic goals. 2. WORK? IS require better preparation and supports to enter the labour market during and after their studies. Unfortunately, within a Canadian economy heavily dependent on temporary workers, IS have become the new TFWs. 3. STAY? Most IS intend to stay while IRCC plans for them to return home; how to reconcile these intentions? Given the increasing importance of 2-step migration pathways, TRs need access to settlement services, but who will provide them? 4. DIVERGENT STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIES: The current system is working well for employers, middle- and upper-income Canadians, PSIs, and the federal government. How do we make it work better for international students? 5. WE WANTED STUDENTS; WE GOT PEOPLE: PSIs thought they could recruit “students” - perfectly self-contained units that could be slotted easily into classrooms then return home. Instead, we got “people” with their messy lives, hopes, dreams, families, struggles, and so on. Our research shows the need to provide holistic services to the whole persons we invite to study in our institutions, work in our province, and stay in our country.

To address the issues identified, our study provides recommendations to various stakeholders.

IRCC:

Provide more flexibility around education breaks and remove Dual Intent provisions

Give PGWP holders access to settlement services

Require English language testing as part of study permit application (at least IELTS 7.5/CLB 9 or 10)

Increase initial required funds to \$20,000 per year

Convene a national body (along LIP model) to assemble stakeholders to discuss IE

POST SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS (PSI):

Recruit students who are academically prepared to succeed in post-secondary and thus the Cdn labour market

End reliance on agents whose focus is profit and promote self-application by prospective students

Increase transparency of data on student success, employment after graduation, and how IS fees are spent

Provide employment services and career counselling for IS

Recruit from a wider variety of markets so no one country contributes more than 10% of the IS body

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT:

Create a regionalization strategy to better match labour market needs

Provide better oversight of employment relationships involving LMIA's

Create accountability measures to improve PSI recruitment strategies and student outcomes

Give PGWP holders and IS in their last year of studies full access to WorkBC services

Open up PNP to the trades

**Who was involved in this project (eg. faculty, students, community partners)? How did their involvement contribute to the project's success? Were there any challenges to overcome?**

The team included 16 students, 6 faculty members, and 7 college staff/admin from Langara and CNC, as well as 5 community partner staff from our community partners at South Vancouver Neighbourhood House (SVNH), and Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society (IMSS). Each brought their own expertise and experience to the project and were vital to its success. We also thank the Institutional Research departments at Langara and CNC for their assistance. Dr. Miu-Chung Yan (UBC) provided guidance and support.

**Please share any personal stories that made this research experience memorable/valuable.**

For me personally, learning about the complex struggles IS experience was really eye-opening. Many people at Langara hold overly optimistic views when it comes to international students, partly because most of us only stay in touch with the strongest students. Interviewees also mentioned the defensive attitude of administrators. Our research has shown the reality for most students is quite different. The system treats Punjabi students especially like commodities moving along a heartless conveyor belt of exploitation. I could see the problems as an instructor but now I have a much better systemic view and it is clear to me that almost all of the problems IS face stem from college recruitment policies that focus on money rather than students. Langara is obviously not alone in embracing a model in which we rely on poor farming families in India to mortgage their farms and use money lenders to fund our institution. The role of neoliberal values is also clear here, for example, reducing public spending, and shifting to temporary relationships in education, employment and immigration. Canadians need to decide whether we value post-secondary education or not – if we do, then, rather than relying on money coming from overseas, we must elect politicians who will fund it. I'm grateful to have a better understanding of what my students are going through.

**What are the next steps for this project and for you as a researcher?**

This project will wrap up in December 2023. Although numerous opportunities have come up for me to take part in additional research projects with other researchers in BC and other provinces, I'm looking forward to focusing on teaching again as it is simply too difficult to do research and teach at the same time.

**Please upload any images that will help to showcase your project.**

- [20230202\\_121413.jpg](#)
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- [Jenny-Koyali-Seline-YOW.jpg](#)
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- [Intl-St-Pathways-Team-Photo-Spring-2022.pdf](#)

**Langara Institutional Repository Consent**

By submitting, I consent to uploading my ARC Fund final report to the Langara Institutional Repository (The LaIR).