International Students and the Canadian University: Towards the Creation of Tailored Action Plans for a Dynamic User Population

Stacey Zip

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Abstract

This paper explores dynamic international student populations within Canadian academic institutions and their relationship with the academic library. The international student body has evolving needs that must be adequately addressed by the library and institution to support growing numbers of students. Plagiarism, language barriers, and an unawareness of library services are well-known barriers to success, while more current issues such as changing technologies are equally problematic. Through efforts such as hiring an international student librarian, academic libraries may discover the specific issues facing their institution's international students and begin the process of addressing them in a tailored manner. Data collection needs to be a priority for better understanding international students, as does partnering with professors and student organizations to market library services and promote information literacy in a Canadian context. An international student librarian may also provide continued outreach that is inclusive, proactive, and collaborative, which would, in turn, create an atmosphere that fosters international student success and is able to support rising numbers.

Keywords: international student; Canada; university; dynamic; demographic

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Introduction

The international student population is growing throughout Canadian universities, yet the outreach and services that academic libraries provide may not be able to sustain increasing numbers in the future. These students need to be supported by an international student librarian who will create a targeted and flexible action plan that accounts for the specific institution's demographics and includes partnerships across departments. While commonly cited issues such as plagiarism, language barriers, and ignorance surrounding library services should continue to be addressed, other issues may arise or change as variables like technology affect information literacy.

International students are an evolving demographic; the way in which an academic library supports them depends on the specific needs of their institution's international students. Through ongoing data collection on international student needs, the academic library's action plan for successful outreach may then be tailored to fit each institution.

Background

The presence of international students in Canadian academic libraries is growing. According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2016), there was a 92 percent increase in international students arriving in Canada from 2008 to 2015, with 353,000 international students living in Canada in 2015 (p. 6). International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) Monitor (2016) stated that "the number of international students in Canada increased by 8% in 2015" (para. 1), and although there is competition from other countries for studying abroad, Canada remains an attractive location and growth has been steady. The CBIE reported that most of these international students resided in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia (2016, p. 16).

Most students were from China, followed by India, France, and South Korea. While the demographics changed slightly from year to year, Asia remained the most common continent of origin for international students (CBIE, 2016). Statistics Canada (2016) also reported that “the international student population at Canadian universities grew 88%” from 2004 to 2014 (para. 2). Dennis (2017) noted that since Donald Trump was elected, “International deans and recruiters are facing the perception that the United States is no longer a country welcoming international students and scholars . . . perception becomes reality whether that reality is true or not” (p. 1). Canada may be poised to experience a greater amount of international students than what is typical. The number of international students in Canada has been steadily increasing without indication that this trend will stop in the near future.

The CBIE (2016) stated that one of the main reasons that international students chose to study in Canada was due to the “quality of the Canadian education system” (Infographic 1). This may be a reputation that Canadian universities will soon be unable to maintain, as more and more international students enter with issues that are often different from the domestic student body and require dedicated efforts to address them. The literature on international students lists many issues that they face. One such problem is the language barrier, which academic institutions fail to properly address. For example, Berman and Cheng (2001) discussed how the complexities inherent in language barriers were misunderstood by professors and, as such, international students often did not get the support they needed inside the classroom; the students then relied on each other for academic support. Also, a general anxiety surrounding usage of all library services including printing, checking out materials, and using

databases is commonly cited as being problematic for international students (see Knight, Hight, & Polfer, 2010). Other common issues include plagiarism (Badke, 2002; Knight et al. 2010; Gunnarsson, Kulesza, & Pettersson, 2014; Amsberry, 2009), and cultural barriers (Furnham, 2004; Kim, 2013). Canadian universities need to better serve these students if they are to accommodate the growing international student population of the future.

As the number of international students continues to grow, these issues may become an increasingly urgent problem for the Canadian university, particularly since international students should be regarded as valuable stakeholders in the university system, not simply sources of revenue (Smart, 2018). The ICIM (2016) stated that “the economic impact of international students in Canada has recently been estimated at CDN\$11.4 billion” (para. 1). As the number of these students grows, so too does the university’s reliance on their choice to study at their institution, as well as their ethical obligations to best support them (Chen & Van Ullen, 2011). If universities and academic libraries do not actively address international students’ barriers, the quality of study is likely to decrease, which could then deter future international students from choosing Canada as their post-secondary destination. Canadian librarians and administrators need to evaluate and develop new methods specific to their institution to better serve this diverse student body in order to continue attracting international students.

Effects of Demographics Among International Students

Since there is ample motivation for universities and academic libraries to accommodate international students, librarians must be cognizant of international students’ varied needs. One notable difference is between graduate and undergraduate international

student needs. For instance, Jackson (2005) recognized that graduate students had a higher demand for specialized information competence programs, perhaps since their programs were more specialized and required a greater amount of research. As such, there may exist a greater need for libraries to focus on international graduate students since their desire for informational literacy support is greater than that of undergraduate students. Another difference in how these two international student populations interact is with misinformation on social media. Chen, Sin, Theng, and Lee (2015) found that graduate students were less inclined to share misinformation than undergrads, perhaps because they had several more years of education. As such, teaching information literacy to international students should be tailored to their level of study; undergraduate students may need to be cautioned about what sources they are consulting for their research, while graduate students may better understand misinformation and what constitutes a reliable source of information. Examining the differences and tailoring the library's service objectives accordingly is important.

Effects of Evolving Technology

In addition to demographics, the evolving nature of technology must be accounted for as librarians seek to address the needs of their institution's international student population. The impact of technology's evolution on library services is well documented in the literature. Before 2000, basic technological library services were commonly a source of confusion for international students. Allen (1993) noted that library features such as self serve photocopiers and microfiche readers were unfamiliar to international students. Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1999) also discussed how mechanical barriers such as library equipment created library anxiety and discouraged international students from using these services. However, Liu and Winn (2009) conducted a study on Chinese

international students at the University of Windsor and found that library computer usage barriers had lessened, since academic libraries in China had been offering similar resources to those in Western universities. International students are adapting to the increase in information technologies, and some areas of past concern, such as introducing them to printing services or other mechanical services, have become less of an issue (Liao et al., 2007; Burel, Graser, & Par, 2019). Academic libraries must approach their outreach to international students in a flexible manner that allows for regular re-evaluation if universities are to provide thorough and relevant support.

With these suggestions follows a necessary awareness that international students often experience the aforementioned common adjustment issues such as language barriers and learning a Western style of academic writing. As such, there is a possibility that these students may be reluctant to use different technologies to aid their schoolwork. Hughes (2013) identifies this as “information overflow,” or “challenges in managing multiple information types, online resources, and strategies” (p. 133). Some students in Hughes’ (2013) research mentioned that there was overflow in “the range of search options and functions offered by online tools and lengthy results lists” (p. 133). International students may experience frustration and instead choose to avoid technology-based research tools altogether. Similarly, Manca and Ranieri (2013) performed a critical review of Facebook literature as a learning tool. One of the findings of their research was that while many educators expected students to be eager to use new technologies in university, students were often uncomfortable using social media for these purposes. Li, McDowell, and Wang (2016) also discovered that the international students they surveyed were deeply ambivalent about Facebook being

used for institutional or educational purposes. Also, one finding by Knight et al. (2010) was that for many international students, in-person communication was still preferable to electronic communication. The assumption that modern students prefer innovative technologies for their academic success is challenged by the variety of international student experiences. Technology can be a helpful tool for best serving the international student body, but its efficacy may vary on a case-by-case basis.

Changing Library Services from Country of Origin to Canada

What services are known to international students and what barriers exist will differ from one group of international students to another. For example, in Mu's (2007) observations from a New Zealand university, he discussed that while Asian countries have reference services, they are not often used since many assignments are textbook-based. Mu (2007) also stated that "in some Asian countries, librarians have low social status on campus, so master [sic] students consider themselves even more competent and more knowledgeable than library staff and regard it as unnecessary to approach a librarian for help" (pp. 577-578). Mu (2007) noted that culture played a role in why many Asian international students do not approach librarians for assistance; asking directly for help is viewed as being a nuisance. A university with a larger Asian-based international student body may need to market their reference services in a way that takes into account cultural differences. Conversely, Knight et al. (2010) surveyed three different universities in the United States and found that, at these institutions, the international students did not identify culture as being a barrier to accessing library services. Rather, "lack of knowledge about the library, perceptions of need, and distance [were] obstacles to library use" (Knight et al., 2010, p. 591). The difference in findings may be a result of

analyzing the entire international student population versus choosing to focus on the Asian student population.

Nonetheless, many studies conclude that there is a general need for international students to become more aware of library services and types of resources. Regarding library services, Kumar and Suresh (2000) acknowledged how international students were often unaware that the professional role of a librarian exists; obtaining assistance from a reference librarian or asking for help navigating a database, for instance, were services that were frequently unused since these students had not encountered them before. Self service procedures, such as interlibrary loans or the open stack system, are often not available in other countries (Curry & Copeman, 2005). In addition, a general anxiety surrounding usage of all services, including printing, checking out materials, and using databases, is commonly cited as being problematic for international students (Knight et al., 2010). The degree of difficulty for international students may vary from one academic library to the next, but the general anxiety persists. Indeed, this issue has been found to be the greatest hindrance to international students' university experience. Mehra and Bilal's (2007) study revealed that the inability to utilize library services and research tools was listed as "more significant to the students than learning English as a second language and coping with the American culture and customs" (p. 7). Library services need to be better marketed to international students since many do not know the types of services and resources that are available to them.

Remedial Action

Given the number of issues that international students may face, the academic library needs to develop a thorough and flexible action plan that can respond to these students'

changing needs. As evolving technologies, library services, and demographics influence what is needed to best serve, the library needs to recognize that a dedicated effort must be made in order to “keep up” with the constant influx of international students.

However, many libraries do not have an adequate plan to address international students, in spite of their rising numbers. Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) found that “there [was] no significant correlation between a school having a formalized library instruction program and the percentage of international (non-immigrant) students enrolled” (p. 317). Whether this is due to a lack of financial support from university administrators or a lack of awareness of these students’ needs, what follows are several suggestions for academic institutions to implement.

International Student Librarian

One method for ensuring that international students’ needs are being continually re-evaluated and prioritized is having an international student librarian. Langer and Kubo (2015) stated that such a librarian may “help facilitate communication as the single point person of the library, increase the awareness of international students’ unmet needs, improve library services, programs, and collections for these students, and enhance the reputation of the library” (p. 607). Indeed, Gale (2006) was one such international student librarian who devised an action plan that strove to address common issues such as language barriers, unawareness of services and events, and cultural barriers. Having an international student librarian would also centralize the need for specialized training that is needed to fully aid these students. Ishimura and Bartlett (2014) discussed how many librarians do not receive such training, which would ideally “cover teaching techniques, instruction planning (i.e. session or program content), cultural sensitivity training, and familiarization with students’ background and characteristics” (p. 319).

Academic libraries without an assigned international student librarian expect this responsibility to be shared amongst many librarians who often rely on “their experience, or the idea that ‘practise makes perfect’” (Ishimura & Bartlett, 2014, p. 320). Also, providing training for a number of librarians at each institution is often not done because of issues such as time and cost. Just as there are librarians who specialize in one area, such as copyright, thus eliminating the need for many librarians to obtain training and experience, so too should there be a librarian who is properly trained in and adept at addressing international student needs. Ideally, each librarian in an academic library would be provided with specialized training to address common concerns among international students. Libraries may consider implementing one- or two-day training sessions in addition to creating an international student librarian role.

Not having an international student librarian with cultural sensitivity training and experience with students from different backgrounds leaves academic libraries at risk of fostering detrimental attitudes, such as the idea that international students need to be treated differently. This may encourage stereotypes. For example, Stapleton (2001) challenged the stereotype that Japanese students do not engage in critical thinking in their assignments by conducting a series of studies and analysis of their writing. He found that critical thinking was indeed present when the students were given a topic that they were familiar with, such as rice importation. The problem that those Japanese students had with Western assignments was unfamiliarity with the topic and not lack of critical thinking, as is the stereotype. An international student librarian would ideally be trained to avoid such stereotyped thinking. Instead, they could recognize that the Western style of academic writing may be new for Japanese students, rather than

believing that Japanese students do not critically engage with their topics. Zhang's (2006) research on East Asian students also highlighted the importance of culture-specific librarian training. He discussed how the chances of miscommunication were high if the librarian did not understand key cultural differences between countries since communication is also deeply reliant on culture. An international student librarian would be properly equipped to help diverse international students with nuanced assistance that reflects their specific institution's needs.

Partnership with Professors

In addition to employing an international student librarian, fostering partnerships with other organizations on campus would further strengthen the library's goal of helping international students. Unfortunately, many of these students are not aware of what Western libraries offer, and as Knight et al. (2010) stated, "friends, teachers, and Wikipedia are listed as preferred sources of information before librarians and other library resources" (p. 587). University administrators need to recognize that these students may not initially approach the library as their primary source of information, which suggests that marketing and outreach responsibility cannot rest solely on the library. An international student may avoid using the library but they cannot avoid contact with their professors, whom they often trust for information such as database recommendations. In order to begin a partnership, the international student librarian may, as Farrell, Cranston, and Bullington (2013) suggested, "market [themselves] to tenure-track faculty who often do not have time to incorporate lessons related to the science of learning" (p. 110). Professors may begin the process of introducing international students to information literacy skills in partnership with a librarian since "the Libraries' focus on information literacy in their instruction program could perfectly fill

the need to teach students about how to evaluate information and knowledge claims” (Farrell et al., 2013, p. 110). The students would then be introduced to the skills that are necessary for success in a Western academic setting and the task of marketing may be shared by a trusted source of information with which all international students will interact.

Partnership Across Campus Organizations

Interdepartmental collaboration is a necessary step that academic librarians and university administrators must tailor to their individual institutions’ departments and opportunities. Chen and Van Ullen (2011) listed groups at their university, such as the Office of International Student and Scholar Services, the Writing Center, Information Technology Services, and teaching faculty as potential partners for helping international students. In their research, Chen and Van Ullen (2011) discovered that collaborations produced a positive result for helping international students understand plagiarism. Li et al. (2016) also found that interdepartmental partnerships were necessary for reaching international students. They achieved higher numbers of views for their vernacular videos as a result of their partnership with the International Student Association and realized that such promotional activities greatly encouraged video viewing. Many researchers have discovered that collaboration with other departments increased the success rate of addressing international students’ unique informational needs.

Since there are often many departments in universities that interact with international students, embedding the international student librarian within these departments may be a possibility worth exploring. As Brown, Fu, and Blackson (2017) observed, “The embedded librarianship movement has grown out of the need to re-

envision the traditional role of libraries in a 21st century” (p. 20). This need to re-envision librarian roles has grown along with the need to adequately serve the rising numbers of international students. Having an embedded librarian may solidify interdepartmental ties in a manner that would not be possible if the librarian were to remain in the library.

Conteh-Morgan (2001) suggested that not only should librarians foster a close partnership with English as a Second Language teachers, but they should also teach information literacy classes to international students. Many opportunities exist for a librarian to become embedded in departments and foster strong ties with other groups that support international students.

Data Collection

Once the international student librarian has made plans to collaborate with departments and professors, they must begin the process of collecting data specific to their academic library. Several factors must be given particular attention, such as collecting information on the current demographics of the university’s international student body as well as identifying current trends and how to best address them. Yi (2007) examined each group of international students studying at Texas Woman’s University with the goal of understanding differences in their information needs. Yi (2007) recognized that “the findings of this study will be valuable in planning, developing, and enhancing resources and services for international students” (p. 666). Yi’s (2007) methods for gathering data included email surveys sent to international students, which allowed for the students themselves to identify desired services and areas of improvement for the library. The academic librarian must “fully understand the patterns, strategies, and problems of international student information needs so as to improve academic library resources, service quality, and teaching efficiently for international students” (Yi, 2007, p. 671). The

international student librarian has a responsibility to assess the specific needs of their institution's population by collecting data. As previously discussed, variables such as being either at the graduate or undergraduate level affect what international students need, and a tailored plan that does not treat international students as homogenous is ideal.

Collecting data solely through the students themselves provides the librarian with an incomplete picture, since students are often unaware of what services are offered at an academic library and they may, for instance, incorrectly identify a lack of resources and services. Also, plagiarism is a complex topic where they may mis-evaluate their understanding. In Liu and Winn's (2009) research, for example, one international student claimed that he did not have trouble with in-text citations, but he was surprised to have had an assignment returned to him with instructions to redo the bibliography. Liu and Winn (2009) stated, "it turns out that he did not comprehend citation styles or their related formats at all" (p. 571). Once this student's skills were tested, he understood that he did not have the required citation skills for his assignment and only then did he seek out a librarian for assistance. Farrell et al. (2013) recognized in their research the need for a varied approach in collecting data in order to "help us learn about our unique population of countries and cultures and to identify our users as individuals" (p. 115). A balanced approach to collecting data would include analyzing responses from librarians, students, and potentially professors for a more accurate idea of what skills these students require and what is needed to successfully assist them in their university education.

As events are held, data should be routinely gathered to maintain an accurate understanding of international students' needs, as demographics may change and responses to outreach may vary. Langer and Kubo (2015) surveyed international students' responses to outreach events. Their data revealed that reaching international students within the first few weeks was the most effective way for them to increase awareness and usage of the academic library and its services at Fresno State University. Also, data revealed that workshops offered later in the academic year were not well-attended. The library was then able to adjust their ongoing plans for student events. Each university may perform such routine surveys in order to gauge the ongoing issues, demographics, and success of the library's plan of action.

Potential Approaches and Common Issues for International Student Outreach

Proactive Action Plan

Once the data have been collected, a unique outreach plan that reflects international students' individual needs must be created. Carter and Seaman (2011) noted that such a planned effort is not common, stating that "while many libraries participate in different types of outreach, they often do so in informal and *ad hoc* ways without the benefit of systematic and well thought out outreach programs" (p. 168). International students would benefit greatly from a systemic, flexible plan that is responsive to change; however, there are several issues that need to be avoided when developing an outreach plan for them. One such issue is the danger of relying on international students to seek out assistance when they may be reluctant to do so. Expecting the student to approach the librarian happens with embedded librarians as well as in the

traditional model where the librarian remains in the library. An “outpost” librarian is a potential form of embedded librarian, which Rudin (2008) identified as “the next logical leap from outreach to outposts, leaving the mother ship to set up satellite service points, seeking a new and more effective deployment model for the university librarian cadre” (p. 60). As Rutledge and LeMire (2016) observed, this model also depends on the international student to approach the outpost, which may not be effective since these students may not have strong affiliations and connections with the campus. They stated that “outposts are in many cases a passive kind of outreach, requiring students and other community members to take the initiative to visit the librarian, which can discourage those who are unfamiliar with library services” (Rutledge & Lemire, 2016, p. 115). The international student librarian must be careful not to rely solely on outreach that depends on these students, with weak connections to their department and campus, approaching the events and librarians themselves.

The remedy to passive methods is creating a plan where international students can interact in the environments that they normally occupy, and with familiar people. As Brown et al. (2017) stated, “Serving underrepresented populations requires active outreach that engages students by building broad-based relationships with organizations that serve these populations” (p. 20). Such organizations have established connections with international students, and if collaborations are fostered by the academic library, the students may be informed of events, services, etc. through people that they trust in a familiar environment. Creating “outposts” is not enough to attract international students to the library; building relationships with campus departments and organizations provides an active way in which the library may provide

effective outreach. Rutledge and LeMire (2016) stated that another strategy for active outreach that they used at their university “was to build relationships directly with students in our target demographic areas” (p. 120). The international student librarian may foster relationships through informal interviews across campus and identify areas for improvement through direct contact with the students. In this manner, international students may feel more comfortable identifying their needs if they view the librarian as someone who is friendly and willing to relate to their unique needs in an accustomed environment.

Inclusivity

The outreach plan must also not propose events that isolate international students from the remaining student body since these students have varied experiences and challenges that often overlap with those of domestic students. Ye (2009) stated that usage of the term “international student” is problematic; a dichotomy is created, which encourages stereotypes and does not allow for a nuanced approach to serving students from equally nuanced backgrounds. In dismantling this term, librarians may approach each student as unique rather than relying on cultural assumptions. As academic libraries create unique programs and orientations for international students, they must recognize that one major source of stress for them is the feeling that they are isolated from domestic students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). McLachlan and Justice (2009) observed that for international students “establishing friendships with American students was a slow and, at times, a frustrating process. Participants reported having some American student friends, but wished they had more interaction with American students” (p. 30). Segregating international students from the rest of the student body through, for example, events exclusively for international students is detrimental to their efforts

towards familiarizing themselves with the local culture and expanding their support networks. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) also noted that “international students were more likely to have positive experiences and achieve their educational goals, if they [had] a satisfying contact with the host culture and [lived] in a pleasant social atmosphere” (p. 31). International students’ varied needs would be better met if the academic library sought to be inclusive of all students.

Domestic students may equally benefit from information sessions and library-related events since international students may “share similar linguistic and cultural challenges with domestic students” (Hughes, 2013, p. 138). Outreach should be open to any student because they may also be unaware of many services and may struggle with similar issues such as plagiarism or information literacy. Regarding classroom instruction, Prescott and Hellstén (2005) recommend “the adoption of teaching methodologies that are developed with international students in mind but which are implemented for the general university student population” (p. 88). Similarly, the international student librarian may begin by constructing a plan that is crafted based on the implications of the data collected. The plan should then also allow all students to participate in order to both encourage integration and satisfy the needs of domestic students while respecting the wide variety of student needs.

Implications for University Administrators

Canadian university administrators must be willing to recognize the need for well-supported and informed international students in the academic library if this student group is to continue to expand. As Chen and Ullen (2011) asserted, “Institutions that admit international students and benefit from their tuition dollars have an ethical

obligation to understand the issues that might impede international students' success and provide a mechanism to overcome them" (p. 226). With international students providing plenty of tuition dollars for universities, administrators must recognize the importance of the academic library to these students' success and allot funds accordingly. However, libraries may face resistance since this need is not often recognized. For example, Farrell et al. (2013) experienced difficulty in establishing necessary campus connections and being included in their university's strategic planning regarding an influx of international students. As a result, their outreach plans were delayed and funding was not secured. Once the academic library is recognized as being integral to international student success, effective action plans may be created that are specific to each institution.

A main task of administrators is to support these students by providing funding for initiatives such as an international student librarian and resources for outreach events and programming. In turn, this would bolster the university's reputation as a supportive academic environment that is dedicated to helping a dynamic group of international students. Hughes (2013) stated that their findings offered "personalised, contextualised insights about international students' resource-using approaches, [which] alert educators to international students' varied strengths, challenges and information literacy needs as information-using learners in a culturally diverse context" (p. 139). An evolving plan for sustaining international students is integral, and this will require administrators to be willing to consistently encourage collaborations, allow for fluctuations in requested resources, and support an ongoing data collection process.

Conclusion

The way in which an academic institution provides support for international students relies on understanding that their needs and demographics are dynamic. As the number of international students is likely to grow in the future, the library needs to be well equipped to recognize both their commonly-cited needs such as issues with plagiarism, language support, and an unawareness of Canadian library services as well as issues that are specific to different demographical make-ups. For instance, a university with a higher percentage of graduate international students will likely want to focus more on database instruction than one whose international students are primarily undergraduate students. To maintain outreach that accurately reflects the needs of the international student population, academic libraries may employ a trained international student librarian who is dedicated to regularly reassessing the needs of these students and providing outreach that is inclusive, proactive, and collaborative in nature. Each institution's international student community is uniquely composed and, as a result, the action plan must be tailored to their varying needs.

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