



The Hamilton Model: A Case Study of Hamilton's Support for International Students Transitioning to the Labour Market

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Federal immigration policy changes announced in 2024 have reduced the number of international students in Ontario. The subsequent decline in international student enrollment necessitates the need for more targeted and efficient retention efforts if we want to tap into a smaller talent pool. Those who choose to study and work in Ontario often face challenges securing employment after graduation. International students face cultural barriers, employer discrimination, and limited professional networks during the crucial post-graduation transition to the labour market (Arthur et al., 2022). Without effective integration and supports, Ontario risks losing the economic and cultural benefits these students bring (Valade, 2017). This brief outlines the City of Hamilton's approach to supporting international students during this transition, based on the City's Workforce Strategy. The City places significant emphasis on leveraging ecosystem partners to tackle challenges faced by international students and enhance their retention.

In a research project conducted in 2024-2025, the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) used survey data and interviews with students and stakeholders to investigate the networks, programs and services that support international students' transition into the labour market in Hamilton. The innovative network of support in Hamilton is an interesting case study as it also focuses on the retention of international students. Hamilton's interconnected support system relies on partnerships between postsecondary institutions, employers and community members. Using findings from CBIE's report, this brief highlights a great example of how stakeholders (such as employers, institutions and community organizations) can work together to leverage existing services and resources to support international students as they enter the labour market. Hamilton's approach offers insights to other Ontario communities who might benefit from supporting and retaining international students.

Research Question and Methodology

HEQCO partnered with CBIE to investigate the City of Hamilton's innovative, collaborative approach to supporting international students as they transition into the workforce. Using a case study approach, this brief explores the following research question: How do the City of Hamilton's programs and interventions help ease international students' labour market transitions?



CBIE's case study included qualitative and quantitative data. Data from the 2023 International Student Survey (CBIE'S 2023 ISS) were collected and analyzed. The sample included 1,369 Hamilton-based international students. CBIE also conducted interviews with seven students who completed their studies in Hamilton and are now working in Canada, and thirteen key stakeholders, including: representatives from educational institutions, work services, community organizations dedicated to international students in Hamilton and various departments of the City of Hamilton.

Background

City of Hamilton's Workforce Strategy

The City of Hamilton, in collaboration with postsecondary institutions, employers, municipal leaders and community organizations, developed and implemented its 2023 "Hamilton's Workforce Strategy: Harnessing the Ecosystem for Shared Success." The overall aim of the Hamilton Workforce Strategy is to create a welcoming environment that supports newcomer integration into the local labour market and improve their retention.

Hamilton's Workforce Strategy used research and analysis of the city's workforce ecosystem — its current economic targets and workforce — as well as extensive stakeholder consultations to establish a comprehensive action plan (Deloitte, 2023). The key aspects of the action plan are to: support and encourage immigration; align education and training with employer needs; address the employer–employee disconnect; leverage and strengthen the workforce ecosystem partnerships; enable diversity, equity and inclusion; and foster Hamilton's value proposition for talent attraction and retention.

The City of Hamilton's Economic Division, also known as Invest in Hamilton, implements the strategy at the city level, encouraging dialogue and collaboration, while overseeing the progress of key actions. This division consists of various teams supporting business activities in the city and also includes the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) and the Global Hamilton office. HIPC collects data on immigrants' experiences and challenges, working towards mitigating labour market entry barriers and increasing community engagement. The Global Hamilton office works



closely with institutions, employers and community partners, to oversee international student retention activities in addition to foreign direct investment and trade activities.

An integral aspect of the strategy is the recognition of international students' needs as they transition into the labour market. Hamilton's Workforce Strategy outlines the need to support international students graduating from Hamilton's postsecondary institutions by providing education, resources and community connections. Employers are also engaged and educated on the benefits of tapping into the talent pool of international students.

Findings and Discussion

International Students' Labour Market Transition Challenges

Accessing Career Opportunities

One of the labour market challenges highlighted by respondents to the CBIE's 2023 ISS was their limited knowledge of the local labour market and lack of awareness of the employment opportunities available in the local labour market. A quarter (25%) of Hamilton respondents indicated this was one of the main challenges they faced when transitioning to the labour market. This was also reflected in the interviews with Hamilton stakeholders at HIPC who felt that international students looked to bigger cities or companies for opportunities over local Hamilton businesses.

Stakeholders are working to connect international students to local employers and educate them on available opportunities. At the institutional level, both Mohawk College and McMaster University have established co-op, internship and experiential learning programs. Mohawk College works closely with partners in the ecosystem (the community, employers and the City) to deliver relevant training and programming in partnership with employers. The Hamilton Chambers of Commerce also works in partnership with institutions, the Business + Higher Education Roundtable and the Government of Canada to connect students to employers interested in hiring them for a co-op or work-integrated learning experience through the Student Talent Connect initiative. International students can gain insights into the local labour market through



presentations by the Global Hamilton Team at institutional orientation sessions, as well as through economic development tours which highlight key industry sectors.

Cultural Differences

International students also found it challenging to navigate cultural differences and unfamiliar expectations. Interviews with international students revealed they struggled with marketing themselves. One interview participant highlighted how they struggled with “selling” themselves during job interviews as this isn’t encouraged in their culture. Employers are aware and wary of cultural differences, and the adjustments international students may have to make when working in their businesses. A previous study into employers’ perspectives found that their main concern with hiring international students is their lack of “soft skills,” including their “cultural fit,” despite their strong “hard skills” (Desai-Trilokekar et al., 2016).

In line with their new strategy, initiatives to provide employment support and career services for international students to better prepare them for their transition into the labour market are expanding. The pilot program “Hamilton Workforce Ready” — currently being developed by the Global Hamilton team — will offer support to international graduates from Hamilton’s PSE institutions by streamlining and enhancing existing services for better delivery, working closely with institutions, community organizations and employers to ensure the relevance of initiatives that align with labour market needs. Some of the initiatives include consultations, events and mentorship opportunities for international students. Other initiatives, such as the Connect to Careers Job Fair, provide international students with opportunities to make connections with employers. The job fair was the largest in Hamilton, and organized in collaboration with employers, postsecondary institutions, Workforce Planning Hamilton and the City of Hamilton’s Economic Development Division to connect students and other job seekers to employers in Hamilton.

Employers’ Biases

Interviews with international students further revealed their frustrations over employers preferring Canadian work experience yet hesitating to provide opportunities for international students to gain this experience. Forty percent of international student respondents to CBIE’S 2023 ISS in Hamilton are aware of this bias and are under the impression that Canadian employers are reluctant to hire them. For some employers,



international students are seen as “risky hires” due to changing rules and regulations around immigration (El Masri & Khan 2022; Desai-Trilokekar et al., 2016).

To address this issue, Global Hamilton has put in place the Global Business Chat on International Talent. As part of this initiative, employers are educated on the processes and benefits of hiring international students, informing them of strategies to get the most out of the international talent pool. HIPC also outlines training, education and resources for employers wishing to hire immigrants through the Hamilton Employers Hire Immigrants campaign. The work done through this campaign and initiative complements the goals of creating a more welcoming environment for international students, addressing local labour market needs and integrating them into key economic sectors.

Conclusion

The City of Hamilton’s Workforce Strategy places a critical focus on the retention of international students and newcomers, creating a unique, collaborative ecosystem of supports. Central to Hamilton’s approach is a coordinated, multi-sectoral effort to equip international students with the tools and insights needed to thrive in the local workforce, while also preparing employers to effectively support and leverage the talent of this globally trained cohort. Initiatives across postsecondary institutions, municipal, provincial and federal governments, businesses and community organizations work in tandem to raise awareness of employment opportunities, demystify cultural and professional norms and encourage employers to recognize the value of hiring international students. This shared responsibility model builds a resilient support network that strengthens the economy while enriching the community through greater diversity, inclusion and cultural exchange. While Hamilton is a large city, its collaborative efforts to support international students can be adapted to smaller and northern communities where barriers are greater and the economic and cultural benefits even more vital.

The immediate post-graduation period is a vulnerable yet pivotal time for international students, and the City of Hamilton’s collaborative approach offers a compelling blueprint for other Ontario communities. By investing in wraparound supports that span career guidance, cultural orientation and employer engagement, municipalities can strengthen newcomer retention, drive sustained economic growth and foster more dynamic, connected communities. As labour market needs evolve, adopting Hamilton’s inclusive,



partnership-driven framework may prove essential in building a more adaptive and welcoming province.



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