SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK

DIGITAL IMMIGRATION ADVISING TOOLS FOR INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

International Student Development at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver Campus)
Vancouver, British Columbia

Area of Practice:
Information and Orientation

A Pathways to Prosperity Project

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PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada

VOIES VERS LA PROSPÉRITÉ
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

International Student Development (ISD) is a department at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Vancouver campus with expertise in international student issues. Within the larger department is a group of International Student Advisors (all of whom are Regulated International Student Immigration Advisors [RISIAs] or Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultants [RCICs]) and Advising Assistants. This team advises on issues such as immigration (e.g., study permits, visas, co-op/spouse/post-graduation work permits) and health insurance, while coaching students through life and cultural transitions. ISD supports international students from the time they receive UBC admission until their post-graduation transition. ISD also provides limited support to international students' accompanying partners and children, as well as to some visiting international research, permanent resident, refugee, and Canadian citizen students.

For most international students, maintaining legal immigration status and documents in Canada is a new responsibility. In recent years, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has improved its communication and online application usability. However, international students remain ineligible for many federal and provincial settlement supports, and they experience significant challenges understanding immigration procedures and policies. They encounter cascading logistical challenges when they misinterpret complex and frequently-changing immigration policies, make mistakes on IRCC applications, or forget to renew documents - all negatively impacting their educational, professional, and immigration goals. ISD fills this service gap to ensure that UBC-Vancouver international students understand Canadian temporary residence application procedures and policies, enabling them to thrive in all areas of their student life.

With the rise in international student enrolment at the UBC-Vancouver campus over the last decade, and the additional challenges that international students faced at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., frequent and sudden immigration policy changes and travel restrictions, in addition to changing situations in their home countries), ISD needed (1) more efficient ways to manage an ever-increasing volume of inquiries, as well as (2) more proactive strategies to help international students avoid common pitfalls. Additionally, because UBC-Vancouver international students are located all over the world, ISD required (3) virtual solutions which could be easily accessed anywhere. These factors led to the development of the digital immigration advising tools for international students.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:
Digital Immigration Advising Tools for International University Students

Description:
ISD developed and maintains five web-based digital immigration advising tools to support international students:

1. The most basic digital support tool is the automatic online document expiry reminder system, in which all registered international students are automatically invited to enroll (by entering their document expiry dates into the system). Once enrolled, this system sends an automatic reminder when one of their key documents (study permit, temporary resident visa, passport,

or BC Medical Services Plan) is about to expire. Students who do not enroll receive monthly reminder emails to enroll in the system.

2. The second digital support tool is an International Student Guide, which consists of 89 detailed webpages providing information on immigration and other policies relevant to international students.

3. A more intensive digital support tool embedded within the International Student Guide is a series of step-by-step immigration application tutorials, which provide more detailed guidance on how to apply for documents for students.

4. A fourth level of support includes a series of immigration application review courses, as well as pre-arrival immigration and health insurance orientation (iPrep) courses (tailored to undergraduate, graduate, and exchange students). These courses are offered asynchronously on the Canvas learning management platform and cover topics such as how to apply for documents and prepare for life at UBC.

5. Finally, a customized webform (using the Qualtrics survey tool) replaces email as the main form of contact by streamlining inquiries and directing students to the various online tools that may meet their needs immediately and help them avoid additional wait time for a personalized response.

If the resources mentioned above do not meet a student's needs, they can request a personalized response from an Advising Assistant or an International Student Advisor through the webform (via email), during virtual drop-in hours, during in-person hours at the office front desk, or by making a virtual or in-person appointment.

Goal(s):
The aim of the Digital Immigration Advising Tools is to effectively and efficiently scale up the delivery of robust immigration advice on temporary resident immigration application procedures and policies.

Target Client Group(s):
The primary clients include the approximately 17,300 international university students enrolled at UBC-Vancouver (as of March 2023), as well as those who have been admitted. Secondary clients include dependent family members, parents/guardians, prospective students, and newcomers to Canada more generally.

Delivery Partners:
UBC-Vancouver Information Technology and Student Communications Services.

Human Resources:
Within ISD, the International Student Advising team consists of 4 Advising Assistants, 1 Advising Coordinator, 9 International Student Advisors (RISIAs and RCICs), and 1 International Student Advising Manager. Regarding the set of web-based digital immigration advising tools specifically, 1 International Student Advisor with communications expertise manages the International Student Guide and Application Tutorials (among other portfolio areas), and 1 International Student Advisor manages the immigration application review courses (among other portfolio areas). These 2 International Student Advisors also manage the webform. The document expiry reminder system is largely automated and does not require much management, but an additional International Student Advisor manages reminder system data tracking and responds to students' inquiries about the reminder system.

Funding:
ISD is part of Student Affairs, which falls under the portfolio of the Vice-President at UBC.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:
The set of web-based digital immigration advising tools is loosely organized around a stepped care model to ensure international students can access the advising they need in the most appropriate format. The stepped care model streamlines advising by allowing students to access answers to most questions before meeting their advisor, if a meeting is required at all. In fact, most student questions are answered through the different tools. In addition, the international student guide is very comprehensive and regularly updated, providing international students with relevant information in one place. The reminder system helps students keep track of their document expiration dates, which lessens the number of students who experience major immigration disruptions (e.g., falling out of status due to an expired study permit). Finally, all web-based tools include immigration information written in plain English to cater to the wide range of language proficiencies among international students.

Efficient:
Many students initially think they require a personalized response from an advisor but are in fact able to get their questions answered asynchronously through one or more of ISD's web-based digital immigration advising tools. The webform in particular dynamically engages with international students' inquires by suggesting potential online resources which may answer a student's inquiry, before inviting them to submit an inquiry. This helps students get connected to the necessary supports more quickly and conveniently. It also allows ISD to focus their personalized advising on students with complex cases or other specialized needs.

Relevant:
With the exception of a minor dip during the 2020/21 academic year (due to COVID-19), international student enrolment at the UBC-Vancouver campus has steadily increased over the past decade, from ~9,500 students in March 2013 to ~17,300 in March 2023, now representing 28% of the students enrolled at the UBC-Vancouver campus. The higher education institution is a major part of international students' lives in Canada and becomes a trusted source of information. IRCC policies are intertwined with institutional policies set by higher education institutions (e.g., the definition of full-time studies, the dates of a scheduled break), so delivering advice in the specific context of the institution ensures the information is as relevant as possible.

Sustainable:
ISD developed digital tools which could be largely set up and managed within the department. For example, an International Student Advisor designed the webform in Qualtrics and then made a guide for other staff, which mitigated the need to hire an external resource. ISD also regularly performs audits of the extensive information shared through the digital tools to ensure that it remains up-to-date. This is especially important given the speed with which immigration policies and procedures can change. In the future, artificial intelligence may allow the further development of tools and make them even more efficient.

Transferable:
Many large higher education institutions already have some version of one or more of the web-based digital immigration advising tools. Because most of ISD's tools are visible to the public online, organizations can review these tools and adapt them to their own needs. However, they should ensure that the tools are developed in a sustainable way. Every advising tool requires a plan to ensure it stays current as policies and procedures change.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:
UBC-Vancouver international students have, on average, relatively high digital literacy skills. This allows the International Student Advising team to lean heavily on web-based digital tools to deliver on-demand advice. As a result, the team does not rely on just one or two digital tools but rather a comprehensive set of in-depth tools, each of which serves a different purpose to meet different needs.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:
Many organizations have a webform to streamline email inquiries. However, ISD's webform asks users to select the topics related to their inquiry, and then displays existing online resources for users to consider reviewing if they have not already done so. This helps some users get answers faster without having to wait for a personalized response. In addition, the International Student Guide, tutorials, and application review/iPrep courses are extensive and detailed. While these tools require significant maintenance, they also help users connect to the necessary information without having to get a personalized answer from a staff member.

High Client Uptake:
The digital immigration advising tools are promoted during pre- and post-arrival orientation sessions for international students. ISD also includes links to the tools in their regular communication with international students through various university channels. Because international students generally struggle to get sufficient application support or policy clarification directly from IRCC, they often turn to ISD's Advising team during their initial study permit application process and then continue to rely on them to fill various gaps in services and knowledge. Some evidence of high client uptake is reflected in the number of International Student Guide website pageviews, which increased from ~230,000 in 2013/2014 to ~2 million in 2022/2023.

High Client Retention:
The digital immigration advising tools are not necessarily focused on retaining clients, but rather meeting the needs of the international student population at UBC-Vancouver campus.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:
In 2020, 2747 international UBC students who had interacted with ISD completed a survey to assess their perception of ISD's advising services more generally. The results showed that ISD's advising interactions are important to students. For example, 80% of students rated the importance of resolving their ISD advising issue in order to live/study at UBC as ''important'' or ''very important''. Furthermore, 70% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt less stressed about their issue after the ISD interaction. They also reported significant increases in confidence in their level of knowledge as a result of their advising interaction. For example, when asked to rate how knowledgeable they felt about their issue before and after the advising interaction, the percentage of students who felt "knowledgeable" or "very knowledgeable" increased from 36% to 82%.

The survey also found that ISD advising interactions frequently help students avoid preventable problems. In particular, 60% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to prevent something bad from happening because of their interaction with ISD. Also, 72% agreed or strongly agreed that they could use the knowledge learned to solve the issue if it were to come up again, and 70% agreed or strongly agreed they would be more likely to better manage their documents in the future.

Overall, respondents also reported high levels of satisfaction with ISD's advising services. For example, 78% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the overall level of service/care received. Furthermore, 68% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had received service in a reasonable amount of time, and 79% found that the information they received was useful or very useful. Finally, 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend their friends with similar issues to the ISD advising services.

In terms of the digital advising tools in particular, there is evidence that the page views of the International Student Guide significantly increased over the years (~230,000 pageviews in 2013/2014 to ~2 million in 2022/2023). Furthermore, the step-by-step immigration application tutorials had 900,000 page views between April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023. Since the launch of the first immigration application review courses in December 2021, 2,623 UBC students enrolled in these courses. In addition, 2,175 students enrolled in iPrep courses between April 2022 to April 2023. The online expiry reminder system was utilized by roughly 67% of international students between 2018 and 2023. Finally, since its launch in October 2021, the webform received 19,285 initial interactions (as of April 30, 2023). Of these interactions, 8,045 (42%) resulted in a direct email inquiry. This means that over half of all initial inquiries were likely resolved immediately through the webform (i.e., by directing users to online resources) without requiring a personalized response.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

In 2014, ISD launched an Advising Assessment Project to obtain quantifiable evaluations of its advising process. The Advising Assessment Project included the development of an online survey to answer the following questions: 1) "What is the scope and depth of our advising services?" 2) "What is the impact and value of our advising services?" 3) "Are we making an effective use of resources?" 4) "If not, how can we improve?" The survey was structured loosely around Donald Kirkpatrick's "Four-Level Training Evaluation Model", which aims to measure reactions (what participants think and feel about the interaction), learning (increases in knowledge/skills and changes in attitudes), behaviours (knowledge, skills, and attitudes applied beyond the interaction), and results (long-term impacts). The survey was first administered in 2014 and readministered in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2020. In addition, in 2014, the project also included focus groups with students who had taken the survey and indicated a willingness to discuss their responses further.

ISD also tracks (1) how many students input their permit/document expiry dates into the online reminder system; (2) how many inquiries are automatically redirected and sufficiently answered through the International Student Guide as a result of using the interactive webform; (3) how many users visit the various International Student Guide webpages, tutorials and review and iPrep courses.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

International Student Guide:
https://students.ubc.ca/international-student-guide

Step-by-step immigration application tutorials:
https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/international-student-advising/tutorials

Immigration application review courses:
https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/international-student-advising/tutorials#online-application-review-courses

Automatic online document expiry reminder system:
https://students.ubc.ca/international-student-guide/immigration/immigration-documents-reminder-system

Customized webform:
https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0J8VRJgJQkuO2b4