

How Can We Encourage Student Participation in International Learning Experiences?

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International learning experiences are invaluable for students. Those who undertake education outside their country of residence develop leadership, self-reliance, language skills, intercultural understanding, sensitivity to local and global issues, and specialist skills when they participate in work placements and field schools. Employers also say that international experience gained through education makes a positive contribution to the workplace.¹

Both students and educators have long recognized the value of learning abroad. Despite this, and the fact that almost all Canadian colleges and universities offer education-abroad opportunities (including semester exchanges, short-term study abroad, field school, and service learning), relatively few post-secondary students actually participate. Only 3.1 per cent of full-time university students² and 1.1 per cent of full-time college students³ in Canada have gone abroad for part of their studies. Compared to some OECD countries, these figures are slim. In Germany, for example, fully 25 per cent of students in bachelors and masters programs have participated in a study abroad experience, and the country hopes to raise this number to 50 per cent by 2020.⁴

Why Are Education-Abroad Figures in Canada so Low?

Why are the numbers so low? It is more about obstacles than a lack of interest. Most undergraduate and graduate students in Canada have at least thought about participating in education abroad and many are genuinely interested,⁵ but a variety of barriers hold them back. The Institute for International Education⁶ has summed up the barriers that prevent students from participating in international learning experiences with three Cs: *cost, curriculum, and culture*. We could also add *circumstance* to this list of barriers. (See Table 1.) Of these, cost is consistently a top issue for students—the direct costs associated with education abroad, as well as the loss of employment income (which is often not sufficiently offset by financial aid opportunities), are a chief concern for financially strapped students.⁷ Curriculum constraints can be especially apparent for students attending colleges, institutes, and polytechnics, where programs are typically shorter and offer fewer elective or flexible program requirements than university undergraduate programs. Cultural and circumstantial barriers represent an array of conditions at the institutional level and in a student's life that may add to their hesitation to study abroad.

Table 1
Barriers to Students Participating in Education Abroad

Cost	Curriculum	Culture	Circumstance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> direct cost of participation: tuition, travel, accommodations, and lost wages from employment in home country; insufficient financial aid/ scholarships to participate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> heavy course workloads, inflexible programs at home institutions, and lack of integration of education abroad into curriculum; onerous credit transfer processes; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of faculty commitment to education abroad; lack of awareness of education-abroad opportunities and benefits; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> employment or other opportunities; family obligations and other responsibilities;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> few for-credit opportunities and lack of official recognition for participation; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> discomfort with unfamiliar locales, cultures, and languages; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> health or security concerns related to travel.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> insufficient course offerings or faculty specialists at host institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inadequate support services for participating and returning students. 	

Sources: Institute for International Education; Universities Canada; Canadian Bureau for International Education; Higher Education Strategy Associates.

What Are Educational Institutions Doing to Overcome These Barriers?

Canadian post-secondary education (PSE) institutions of all types—universities, colleges, institutes—are looking at ways to address these barriers, often as part of multi-pronged strategies to increase the institution’s international focus.

In B.C., for instance, the [B.C. Study Abroad Consortium](#) is making for-credit study abroad more accessible to students. If a student’s home institution doesn’t offer an experience that meets their needs, they can attend the study abroad program of another institution in the consortium. (There are about two dozen participating institutions, including British Columbia Institute of Technology, Royal Roads University, and Douglas College.) The credits students earn through the experience are fully transferable to their home institution.

A recent [forum](#) convened university leaders to brainstorm ideas for addressing students’ reluctance to go abroad for part of their education. The final report of the forum offers some direction for universities, such as: ⁸

- integrating education abroad more closely with programs and curriculum;
- improving credit transfer processes;
- awarding credit for student mobility experiences;
- providing language training;
- communicating better with students about study abroad, especially about costs;
- offering financial support to students.

The forum also identified groups that are inadequately served by current education-abroad initiatives, such as Indigenous students, students who are the first generation in their families to attend PSE, students with dependents, and working students. Their participation could be increased by offering more flexible options, such as shorter opportunities, the ability to complete program requirements online, and field schools that provide short, intensive, practical experiences.⁹

There are some interesting opportunities available to students of colleges, institutes, and polytechnics, too. SAIT Polytechnic in Calgary, for instance, is a founding member of the Global Education Network, a formal institutional partnership between similar post-secondary institutions in the U.S., Singapore, and Australia. The network provides

a variety of international learning options to SAIT students, including full-semester exchanges (which qualify for credit toward a SAIT credential), service learning, and subject- and program-specific study tours. Students in a variety of fields—such as film and video production, baking, hospitality management, and aerospace—meet professionals and industry leaders, tour workplaces, and participate in cultural events, gaining a global understanding of their field of work. As other institutions move toward adopting internationalization strategies that embrace education abroad, the initiatives offered by SAIT and others will help us understand which strategies are most effective at increasing education-abroad participation by Canadian students.

International learning experiences, including SAIT's global education initiatives, are the subject of two briefings to be published by The Conference Board's [Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education](#) later this year.

Related Webinar

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