Why do so many Canadian students refuse to study abroad?

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Just a tiny minority of Canadian students choose to study abroad, and that's a problem. Here's what some universities are doing to try to reverse the trend.

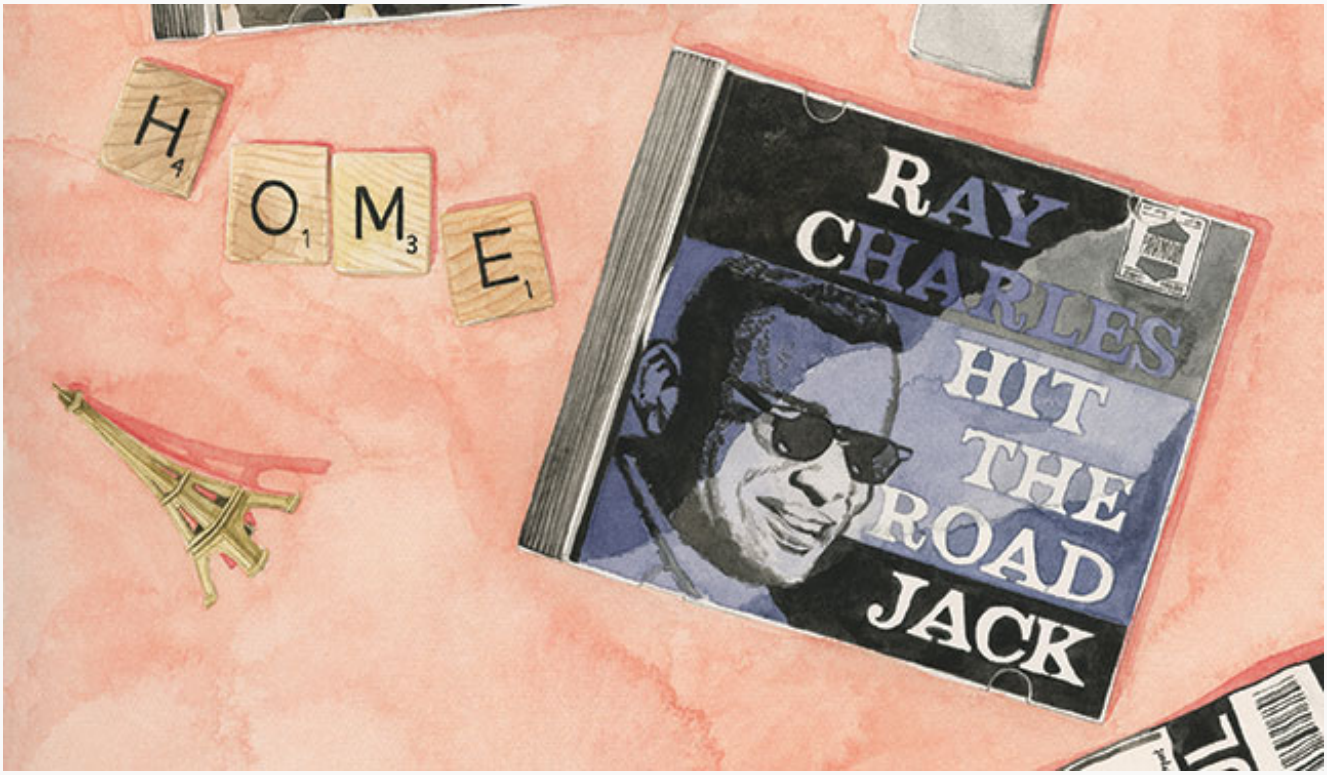
Caitlyn Ryall had her doubts – and her fears. Then a third-year material art and design student at OCAD University, Ms. Ryall weighed the pros and cons of heading abroad for a semester at the University of Southampton in Winchester, England. On the one hand, she felt an excitement and fascination due to her upbringing – her father is a travel writer, and she shared his wanderlust and curiosity about the world. On the other hand, she faced serious challenges: the costs were almost unthinkable (upwards of $15,000), the initial administrative processes seemed to be moving as slow as molasses, and the payoff, in terms of transfer credits, was uncertain. And it would be her first time abroad, without her traditional network of friends and family.

"I lived at home, so it was definitely my first time apartment hunting and looking into roommate situations and things like that," Ms. Ryall notes. "Nobody else from my school was going into this, and I think everyone's a bit nervous about going into something completely alone." In the end, she decided to go for it. "I grew up with lots of travel stories – that was a huge driving force," she remembers.

Ms. Ryall's decision is one that a very small percentage of Canadian students make. According to the most recent statistics gathered by Universities Canada (PDF), just 3.1 percent of full-time undergraduate students (about 25,000) had an international experience in 2014, a number that has remained flat in recent years. Canada lags behind Europe and Australia in this regard, and gone are the days when travelling to a far-flung place felt almost like a rite of passage. In fact, experts say that today's students, pressed for time and with little inclination to venture overseas, see it as an indulgence and a dalliance. However, though the numbers may be stagnant, some schools are moving to make study-abroad sexy again – or at least accessible.

Despite the dropping numbers, studies demonstrate that time abroad is definitely beneficial for students, says Janine Knight-Grofe, research manager at the Canadian Bureau for International Education. Surveys performed by CBIE and Universities Canada found that almost 90 percent of education-abroad alumni agree that these experiences contributed to their career achievements, and more than 80 percent of Canadian hiring managers feel that cross-cultural understanding and knowledge of a global marketplace are assets to the competitiveness of their companies. Meanwhile, alumni of the European Union's Erasmus student-mobility program – which provides grants for students to go abroad for three to 12 months per cycle of study – have an unemployment rate 23 percent lower than their peers, five years after graduation. Noting that international trade accounts for some 60 percent of Canada's GDP, Ms. Knight-Grofe sees a national benefit, too. "More students with foreign experience means a more prosperous Canada," she says.

Amber Pearson, senior manager of education financing at Royal Bank of Canada has seen the advantages first-hand. She advises that, in a crowded job market, this international experience sets graduates apart. "All the numerous benefits come back to one critical point, which is differentiation," she observes. "Any employer, whether for a small, medium or large organization, when they have a stack of resumés from qualified candidates from terrific schools, it's up to the candidate to set themselves apart, and studying abroad is a great way to do that." Specifically, Ms. Pearson says that students who have spent at least some time beyond our borders tend to have a broader and more sophisticated world view, something that can help them relate to customers and clients in a multinational company. They also tend to be more adaptable, which comes in handy when wearing different hats in a corporate setting.



Illustrations by Melinda Josie.

"What's really critical is the level of self-awareness and maturity that studying abroad brings to students," she says. "Having to get groceries or navigate from point A to point B when you don't speak the language, for example, that gives you a level of confidence that you'd bring to the workplace and brings you a measure of success, no matter what industry you choose."

Geneviève Lépine, senior analyst, research, policy and international relations at Universities Canada, says that the challenges of studying abroad cited by students (and parents and professors) are varied. Noting that the pull of home is strong (only 10 percent of students, she adds, even cross provincial lines for their postsecondary education), Ms. Lépine notes that the problem isn't one of supply – schools are offering plenty of cool and quality options.

As examples, she cites Memorial University's north2north exchange program, which provides opportunities for students to study at other University of the Arctic member institutions, and the University of Guelph's field programs in agro-ecology in Cuba and in architecture in Venice, to name just two. "Canadian universities offer many, many opportunities, but in some cases there's just not enough uptake," says Ms. Lépine.

In a world of rising student debt, the number one reason cited for staying home isn't surprising: money. Between hefty tuition fees (which are usually much higher for international students), an often increased cost of living and the fact that foreigners are usually barred from supplementing their expenses by working in their temporary country, studying abroad can be expensive. RBC's Ms. Pearson adds that the flagging Canadian dollar has further increased the challenge and that students abroad often encounter a number of other unexpected costs. "Travelling home for the holidays or for family emergencies – even those expenses can add up."

However, Erin Williams, program manager with the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, suggests that there's more at work here than simple economics. Unlike in some countries where "gap years" are popular, in North America parents don't seem to place as much value on their kids getting an international experience. "One of the things we've been able to glean from the conversations we've had is that a lot of parents equate 'study abroad' with 'taking time off and backpacking,'" she says. "We were surprised at how much parents are not supportive of this."

Some experts speculate that this may all be part of the so-called " bubble-wrapped generation" – a cohort of kids raised in a risk-averse environment and shielded from potentially harmful, if valuable, experiences. However, Ms. Williams says that the biggest factor is a new breed of goal-driven student (and parent). Perhaps now more than ever, people want to see hard evidence of direct benefits.

"They need to be convinced that there's some sort of payoff – like, your son is majoring in commerce and this is going to help his job prospects." She adds that some of the reluctance boils down to a more simple concern: students are unsure about venturing out into that big world, often alone. "It's intimidating for a lot of people. It's one thing to visit your grandma every few years in Hong Kong, but it's a whole other thing to think about being there on your own."

Universities are tackling these obstacles one at a time, starting with some of the most practical problems. Vianne Timmons, president of the University of Regina, notes that her university is addressing the latter concern in a simple but effective way through a 24-hour, toll-free helpline for all of the school's study-abroad students. "It's always available," she says. "Whether they lose their passport, or feel sick, we're there to support them."

She adds that U of R is seeking to lessen the financial sting, too, through the U of R International Experience Travel Fund, which offers $1,000-grants to students going abroad, whether for a week or a full term. And while her university has sent students to 26 different countries over the past five years, Dr. Timmons notes that certain groups, especially Aboriginal students, were underrepresented. The university is seeking to remedy that through a targeted initiative. "You want all of your students to have access to your study abroad program," she says.

Cassie Fisher, a U of R graduate, was one of the Aboriginal students who participated, and she notes that the impacts of going abroad are now benefitting her own students. Now a teacher of Grades 6 through 8 at Seven Stones Community School in Regina, Ms. Fisher spent several weeks studying alongside indigenous students at the Intercultural University of the State of Mexico. Despite some initial nervousness, she remembers that going to that foreign campus actually felt like coming home. The traditions she experienced there, from the sweat lodge to the smudging ceremony, felt very familiar. Ms. Fisher says she learned more about their common struggles against decolonization and saw how indigenous elements can be woven into a larger, more diverse curriculum. "They're really taking back the culture. They're striving, and very successful at it."

Ms. Fisher adds that she's been able to integrate those lessons into her own classroom, where most of her students are First Nations and Métis. "It broadens how my kids see the world," she says. "And maybe it will inspire them to travel and learn about different cultures."

Nevertheless, some of the roadblocks study-abroad students face will be difficult to traverse, including persistent bureaucratic troubles like transferring credits back to Canadian degree programs, a common complaint of study-abroad students. "There's a whole lot of anxiety that students won't be able to transfer their studies back, or that they will even lose a year in the course of doing this," says Ken Steele, a higher education market research analyst and founder of Eduvation and the Academica Group. "That suggests that we have to do better inside the institutions."

Ms. Lépine says universities are making headway on other key points. University leaders are encouraging the federal government to make good on the recommendations of the 2012 Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy to create an international mobility program that, by 2022, would provide opportunities for 50,000 Canadian students per year to study abroad or engage in other learning activities. Leaders in this area are also encouraging shorter overseas experiences.

"Making opportunities shorter than even a single term makes it less daunting, means it doesn't have the same implications, and makes it more palatable and less financially taxing as an option," says Ms. Lépine. "It can serve as a gateway to a longer study-abroad experience. We've seen that those who go on a short-term trip are more likely later to do a full degree abroad, for example."

Experts have also suggested that the study-abroad movement requires strong institutional champions. At Western University, president Amit Chakma is filling that role and prioritizing the creation of many more champions within his university. Two years ago, under Dr. Chakma's guidance, Western, like U of R, started a program through which every student with an average above 80 percent in second year is eligible to receive $1,000 to study abroad in year three.

"A thousand dollars isn't sufficient, but it sends an important signal," says Dr. Chakma, who notes that, in its short life, this award has been enough to boost Western's percentage of study-abroad students above the national average. He adds that it is his goal to create greater awareness of these programs and to encourage faculty to take their students abroad, whether for short-term trips or fieldwork, which is also receiving additional funding at Western. Like several other universities, Western has created an Alternative Reading Week where faculty take students on cross-border cultural experiences during the reading-week break.

While Dr. Chakma agrees that the obstacles may be daunting, he encourages students to look beyond the immediate implications. Even if, for example, a given credit won't transfer back home, the experience itself and the learning outcomes will still be worthwhile.

Eduvation's Mr. Steele adds that solving some of the world's biggest conundrums may just depend on our ability to get more students abroad. "Whether we're talking about global warming or economic meltdowns or refugee crises, it's important to know that the human race has this home that's not just one country," he says. "We need to pull students out of their comfort zone, so they can see how other cultures view the planet."

Caitlyn Ryall's study-abroad experience definitely altered the trajectory of her life. After completing her semester at Winchester, Ms. Ryall opted to go overseas again, completing part of her fourth year at a Copenhagen design firm, where she worked on her thesis creating children's bedding. In the process, she developed her own brand, began to sell her work at a market and started receiving retail sales calls. As a result, after graduation, she plans on returning to Denmark to continue her design success. "My time abroad gave me street smarts that transcend the classroom," she says. "And going overseas helped me narrow down what I wanted to do. Both times I came back way more focused on what I was going to do with my future, and how I was going to get there."

Barriers to Students Participating in Education Abroad

Cost	Curriculum	Culture	Circumstance
direct cost of participation: tuition, travel, accomodations, and lost wages from employment in home country;	heavy course workloads, inflexible programs at home institutions, and lack of education abroad into curriculum;	lack of faculty commitment to education abroad;	employment or other opportunities;
insufficient financial aid or lack of scholarships to participate.	onerous credit transfer processes;	lack of awareness of education-abroad opportunities and benefits;	family obligations and other responsibilities;
	few for-credit opportunities and lack of official recognition for participation;	discomfort with unfamiliar locales, cultures and languages;	health or security concerns related to travel.
	insufficient course offerings or faculty specialists at host institutions.	inadequate support services for participating and returning students.	

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