

Why don't more Canadian students study abroad?

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How can Canada encourage more postsecondary students to study abroad?

Employers and higher ed institutions have acknowledged the value that this type of experience could bring to the country's workforce. But only 3.1% of full-time university students and 1.1% of full-time college students have studied abroad as part of their postsecondary education.

Existing research shows that [Canadian students are generally interested in studying abroad](#), yet they face a number of obstacles. These obstacles have been categorized as the four Cs: cost, curriculum, culture, and circumstance.

We decided to break down these four Cs to build on our current knowledge of them. To do so, we consulted the [StudentVu panel](#) and received responses from 1,424 panelists about their feelings toward studying abroad. We also tracked our results according to the students' estimated family income to see how it might affect their interest in study abroad opportunities.

Overall, our survey confirmed that concerns about cost, curriculum, culture, and circumstance are all barriers for students. But we also looked beyond these results to explore the general perceptions students bring to study abroad and how institutions and governments might address them.

Students are interested in travelling abroad - but not for school

Overall, a significant proportion of students said they planned to travel abroad after they had finished their postsecondary education. This finding might frustrate those who are familiar with the country's low PSE study abroad rates, as it shows that students are interested in travelling abroad, but only after PSE and not during it. According to our findings, the majority (58%) of respondents said that they planned on travelling abroad after graduating, though half of these were undecided about when they would do so. This was especially true of those from higher income households, as 44% of students from households earning \$120 K-\$150 K gave this answer, compared to 29% of students from families making under \$30 K.

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When asked about the number one reason why they would want to study abroad, students most commonly cited "desire to see the world" (57%). The second most common response was "personal reasons" (16%) and the third was "academic reasons" (11%).

For Liz Martin, a research associate with the Conference Board of Canada, these results show that "students aren't being enticed to institutions or programs based on the promise of being able to have an international learning experience—they're more narrowly focused on the logistics of getting their credential and getting out into the working world." Addressing this issue will thus require a concerted effort on the part of schools to communicate the academic benefits of studying abroad and to build a culture of expectation around international learning experiences. If there is no perceived academic or professional reason to travel internationally, students who do not want to disrupt their studies or take on extra costs while attending PSE will not pursue study abroad. One panelist put it the following way:

I see exchanges as an excuse for students to travel. They don't have any real value in my mind. Not to mention, I do not want to travel or go anywhere far away from my family for a long time.

When we asked our panel what the ideal length of a study abroad experience would be, the highest proportion selected one semester (45%), followed by two semesters (24%). Periods shorter than one semester or longer than two were significantly less popular. Western Europe was the most popular destination, with UK being the second highest, AUS/NZ being the third, and East Asia being the fourth.

The study uncovered further findings that can help explain the lack of study abroad participation. 43% of respondents agreed with the statement that “going on an international exchange would be like going on a vacation for me,” while only 34% somewhat or strongly disagreed. 75%, on the other hand, either somewhat or strongly agreed that “international exchanges require a lot of hard work.”

Takeaway: Students might be discouraged by the idea of spending all of their time working while on an international exchange, especially when they associate travel abroad with a desire to see the world and personal enjoyment.

A deeper look at cost concerns

Among all the respondents who had not considered going on an international exchange, or who had considered an exchange but not applied, the most commonly cited barrier was “finances/costs” at 70%.

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We've seen this result in previous research. But what is interesting about these new findings is that the concern about cost **did not vary considerably between household income groups**, with students from \$210 K+ families citing cost as a barrier almost as often as students from <\$30 K households.

Once we established the significance of cost in the decision to study abroad, we asked those concerned about finances whether they would change their minds if their school covered a proportion of the costs associated with studying abroad. 27% said they would definitely apply if this were the case, and a further 67% said they possibly would. This does not mean, however, that students expected up-front grants to cover their expenses. As one panelist pointed out, this same goal could be achieved through strategic partnerships with participating schools:

Cover costs through connected schools. Like having the connection to reduce prices rather than having to cover costs through actual payment. It might limit options but should reduce costs to the student.

In order to convince them to study abroad, 66% of total respondents said their school would have to offset more than half of their total costs. Again, this response did not vary considerably between students from the lowest income households and those from the highest.

Takeaway: Regardless of household income, a majority of students say they would need their institutions to cover more than 50% of the total cost of study abroad to change their minds about embarking on it, all other factors remaining the same.

What else might change their minds?

Finally, we asked students how their schools could make an international exchange a more relevant option for them. 64% mentioned that the courses they took would have to count toward their current program, 58% said that the exchange would have to offer an internship or co-op placement in their field, 39% said the exchange would have to be more relevant to their field, and 38% said that they would have to receive a record of the exchange on their transcript.

These are distinctly actionable points for all institutions, especially those which may not have the finances to develop extensive study abroad scholarships. Therefore, some institutions might achieve better results by ensuring that academic credits transfer smoothly and that students are clearly informed about the accessibility and academic/professional value of international exchanges.

The long and the short of it

The small percentage of students currently studying abroad is only a fraction of the number that might study abroad if the exchange were affordable, shown to be worth the investment, and made unlikely to negatively impact program completion times. One panelist summed up many respondents' thoughts by advising Canadian institutions to "advertise the benefits [of study abroad], make the time overseas count, have a good attitude about international opportunities, and have realistic ideas of what it would involve for students."

Once Canadian institutions are able to better communicate the academic or professional value of studying abroad and to better advertise the route to getting there, we expect to see a shift in the number of Canadian students applying to study abroad as part of their postsecondary education. Until then, students are likely to continue spending their travel money on self-directed vacations after completing PSE.