

#2: Increasing Participation and Overcoming Funding Barriers in North-South Student Mobility

The Voice of Canada's Universities



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Getting more students to participate in mobility programs



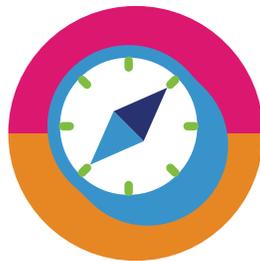
Adopt a “stepladder” approach



Market to under-represented groups



Peer-to-peer mentoring



Parents’ orientations



Integrating mobility into the overall education experience



Increasing Participation in North-South Mobility Programs

Target audience: Canadian university administrators

While 97% of Canadian universities offer international experiences, just 3.1% of full time undergraduate students had taken advantage of these opportunities in 2012-13 (Universities Canada 2014).

The Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) at the University of Ottawa recently warned that Canada is falling behind its OECD country peers and competitors. It challenges educators to set more ambitious targets for outbound international education:

Starting with the current baseline of 3% of undergraduate students annually working or studying abroad, that figure needs to be tripled by 2020, and then again by 2025. These targets will no doubt be viewed by some people as unrealistic. It is our view, however, that outbound educational mobility should no longer be viewed as a frill for a few but rather as an imperative for all. Special efforts will be needed to create opportunities for Canadian students to study and work in developing and emerging economies and to recruit more top students from those countries to study in Canada. In launching an ambitious outbound international education program, Canada would be well placed to learn from other countries where international exchange is increasingly the norm. (CIPS 2015: 35)

Barriers to Participation in Mobility Programs

Research shows that Canadian students are generally interested in studying abroad, yet they face a number of obstacles in doing so. In 2014, the International Institute for Education characterized these obstacles as the “three C’s”: cost, curriculum and (institutional) culture, in descending order of severity. More recently, Martin (2015) has added a fourth “C”—circumstance—to that list. “Circumstance” underscores barriers such as health concerns or family and work obligations preventing students from going abroad for long periods of time.

This document is part of a series of papers that were researched and written by consultants Dr. Rebecca Tiessen and Dr. Kate Grantham from February to August 2016. 20 administrators and faculty members at 14 Canadian universities were interviewed for this project. This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.



Universities are actively working to address these core obstacles. Canadian faculty and administrators interviewed for this research point to a number of additional factors limiting student participation:

1. Lack of information about diversity-related barriers

Understanding barriers to student participation (financial, age, gender, race, privilege, discrimination, etc.) is a major gap in knowledge about mobility programs in Canada, and few studies have adequately examined the limited participation rates of diversity groups.

2. Accessibility

Not all universities face the same challenges to increasing student participation. Francophone universities face the unique challenge of identifying host country partners and institutions where French language-speaking students can be properly accommodated. Issues of access also limit the participation of students with disabilities, for whom travel and accessible accommodation can be more difficult to arrange.

3. Fears about travelling to parts unknown

Many university students are fearful about travelling alone to a foreign country, especially if they have limited or no prior experience abroad. These fears can be exacerbated by sensationalized news stories about terrorism and crime, as well as problematic media stereotypes. Numerous faculty members and international program administrators interviewed for this study indicate that stereotypes and misplaced fears are among the major barriers discouraging participation at their institutions.

Strategies to increase Canadian student mobility participation

The administrators and faculty at Canadian universities interviewed for this research shared strategies that their universities are using to increase the number of students going abroad.

Adopting a “stepladder approach”

Some universities have adopted a “stepladder approach”. Students’ discomfort with longer-term placements can be reduced by first allowing them to participate in shorter-term, faculty-led trips. Students are encouraged to build upon their initial experience by visiting the same place a second time, but for a longer period and in the context of a co-op placement, internship or semester abroad. Some of the mobility program administrators interviewed reported great success generating repeat student participation using this approach.



Marketing to underrepresented groups and recruiting from non-traditional disciplines

Some universities have started marketing mobility programs to underrepresented groups and actively recruiting students from non-traditional mobility disciplines, such as the natural sciences and trade schools.

Peer-to-peer mentoring programs

Some universities have implemented peer-to-peer mentoring programs on student mobility, as students may prefer speaking with their peers about certain topics, rather than to faculty or staff. One Canadian university recruits returning students to act as ambassadors, representing the study-abroad program and assisting program staff with promotion on campus. Competitive scholarships of \$2,000 are available for student ambassadors, to cover 2 semesters of work.

Parents' orientation

One university included in this study offers a parents' orientation about student mobility. The university administrator responsible for this program said that: "What I realized is that if we are able to impact the parents we can reach the students. So what we did was created an information session and we invited the students who are potentially thinking about wanting to study abroad, and we invited their parents to a night at the university to talk about our programs... With that we were able to get more and more buy-in."

Integrated international experiences

That student mobility must constitute an integrated part of a student's overall educational experience was a clear finding in this research. The idea of "integration" can take on a number of meanings, including an increased number of opportunities to receive course credit for mobility programs and to enroll in courses devoted to preparing for and reflecting on students' experiences abroad. Often, however, administrators who spoke about integration were interested in creating a formal designation for mobility program participation that can be indicated on students' transcripts.



Creative funding solutions



The **student fee levy** model can be used to finance North-South mobility programs. For example, the **CEED** program at Concordia is supported cent per credit tuition fee for undergraduates. Students who take part in CEED's program in Uganda pay only \$450 for a 3-month experience.



Students may also find **international internships** opportunities as a means to cover some of the costs of conducting undergraduate or graduate research in the Global South. Students can complete the internship and stay on to complete individual research projects.

Barriers to Funding Student Mobility

Cost

International travel has become increasingly affordable for students. North-South mobility programs can be an affordable option for students – some programs calculate the cost of flights, travel, accommodation and food to be the same, if not cheaper, than the costs of studying in Canada for a semester. However, this incentive is insufficient for students who may not be able to afford time away from jobs in Canada that they depend on to pay their tuition and living expenses.

Other finance-related considerations include the costs of program development, with few institutions currently devoting resources for faculty, staff and administrators to conduct exploratory site visits or develop in-person relationships with host country partners.



Financial accessibility limits diverse student participation

A study from the US shows that financial issues have been found to affect participation for groups such as single parents, mature students and first-generation students (IES Abroad 2009). According to recent research published by the NAFSA Association of International Educators (Hulstrand 2016), increasing the number of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds participating is crucial for the achievement of program aspirations. This is because the oft-stated goals of study abroad and international education—cultural understanding, world peace—will never be achieved without a commitment to diversity (Hulstrand 2016: 60). One university administrator interviewed for this study indicated that a catalogue of the financial awards currently available for Canadian students by government and non-governmental funding agencies would be valuable to support the participation of underrepresented groups.

No seed funding to explore new partnerships

Several interview participants identified lack of seed funds to conduct exploratory site visits and develop new partnerships as a major barrier. Related to this, participants spoke about the fact that many international partnerships simply do not pan out, and highlighted the need for upper administration to account for and accept this possibility when allocating seed funds. This idea was most clearly articulated by a Canadian professor: [What is needed is] recurrent funding, even just small amounts of seed funding that are just about preliminary investigations of what could be possible, and also a kind of a recognition that sometimes...we are going to lose money on this over the long term. But to recognize...that these kinds of programs are worth investigating and investing in despite the high risk that nothing may come of them.

Other faculty members, particularly those with experience developing and running international field courses, suggested that given the probability of uneven program success, seed funds for exploratory site visits and to assess relationships could be a cost-saving measure in the long run.

No funds to visit existing partners

The individuals we interviewed frequently described these visits by administrators to existing partners as difficult to justify to upper administration. Yet participants overwhelmingly agreed that reconnecting in person annually or semi-annually is fundamental for sustainable partnerships. When upper administration is present, these trips can also showcase the value of international learning experiences first-hand, and thereby assist with leveraging funding support.



How Canadian universities are overcoming funding challenges

Student fee levy model

Some universities have opted to finance student mobility by supporting fee levy organizations on campus. One successful example is the *CEED* program at Concordia University, which is dedicated to social justice and community empowerment in Uganda. As a fee-levy association of Concordia, *CEED*'s programming is supported by a 35-cent per credit tuition fee for undergraduates. Students who wish to take part in *CEED*'s experiential learning program in Uganda get their trip subsidized, paying only \$450 for the three-month experience, including accommodation, food, pre-departure training and in-field staff support. Students can opt out of the levy and have that fee refunded.

Using international conferences to meet with current and potential partners

When financial means are limited, conferences organized by international associations offer great opportunities for networking. Discussing her experience, one administrator remarked, "When I go to NAFSA, for example, often I don't even have time to attend any of the panels; all I do is meet with current partners or potential new partners. It's an important time to meet with current partners whom we don't have the funds to go visit or to meet, or to look for potential new partners as well."

Conferences organized by NAFSA, the European Association for International Education (EAIE) and the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) were highlighted as being particularly useful.

Endnotes

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Cover photo courtesy of Allison Gratz, participant in the *Students for Development* program in 2008.