

#3: Evaluation and Measurement of North- South Mobility Programs

The Voice of Canada's Universities



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January 2017



Measuring mobility impact – 2 ways to improve practice



Centralizing management of international programs and evaluation

Increasingly, Canadian universities are setting up International Offices and consolidating electronic reporting systems, student recruitment and student mobility training. This leads to improved monitoring and evaluation, delivery of programs and communication.



Institutional collaboration and information sharing

Canadian university administrators have set up informal networks where they can share experiences, ask questions and offer each other advice. Two such groups are the Horizons User Group and the Study Abroad Software List.



Evaluation and Measurement of North-South Mobility Programs

Target audience: Canadian university administrators and mobility program managers

Students enrolled globally in higher educational institutions are mobile to an unprecedented degree, taking part in greater numbers of international exchanges, volunteering, internships and service learning courses than ever before (Universities Canada 2014; Tiessen and Huish 2014; Turner and Robson 2008). Efforts to increase the number of students taking part in mobility options in Canada are widespread with goals of tripling of those going abroad by 2020 and again by 2025 (CIPS 2015), among other calls for increased student mobility options.

Increasing student participation requires, first, an understanding of how and why students are (or are not) taking part in mobility options. There are three knowledge-gap areas that make it difficult to assess the true nature and extent of mobility programs offered at Canadian universities: 1. Limited demographic information about the number of students going abroad and their destinations, length of stay and possible barriers to participation; 2. There are few studies offering comprehensive, Canada-wide analyses of the impacts of these programs (on the part of the institutions, students and the host communities/partners alike); and 3. There is an absence of research measuring outcomes of these programs within and across universities in Canada.

Challenges that Canadian Universities Face in Measuring and Evaluating Student-Mobility Programs

Inconsistent and insufficient collection of information

Most, if not all, universities in Canada keep track of the program and year of study for students taking part in mobility programs. Some also keep data on trip-related information. However, very few universities collect demographic data on the students travelling abroad. As one administrator explained, “I can see how it (demographic data) might be interesting for researchers at a larger scale to see what the makeup is across Canada, and there could be some really interesting thoughts into that, but at our level it doesn’t make a huge difference in how we market or recruit for our program”.

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.



Lack of available software to record information efficiently

Increasingly, universities are subscribing to web-based student travel information systems to keep track of their mobility data. The most popular providers of student information systems in Canada are the American-manufactured Horizons and Terra Dotta, and the European-manufactured MoveON. Currently, no Canadian software is available, and interview participants offered this as a noteworthy gap. Some Canadian universities have yet to invest in a third-party student travel information system, typically due to the high cost (one administrator quoted a \$25,000 front-end investment and an additional \$10,000 annual subscription fee was paid by her institution), and administrative effort and training is also required. These institutions typically maintain student mobility data manually on Excel spreadsheets or official student records.

Calculating the precise number of students participating in student mobility programs is complicated by the fact that students now have access to a diverse suite of international learning opportunities ranging from international research, to practicum placements and field courses, to volunteering, to study abroad. Tracking these numbers is difficult since universities may not officially record or distinguish among these options and because data for different programs is collected and stored by different offices. Agreeing to nationally recognized typologies of mobility programs is an important first step for data entry and evaluation. As a Director of Global Engagement argued, “Without clear standards or guidelines in place, some students’ international experiences simply aren’t being captured”. One of the challenges of collecting data from students who are doing practicum placements unrelated to courses offered at their home institution is that the educational value of this experience is often not fully realized. Improved coordination and communication between different programs and offices on campus can enable all parties to access better information about the number of students going abroad, the range of the programs in which they are taking part and for how long.

Lack of clarity and different perspectives on what to evaluate

Evaluating student mobility programs also poses numerous conceptual challenges due to the complexity of defining and measuring outcomes such as intercultural learning, self-awareness, civic engagement and intercultural competency (Bennett 2009). The ambiguity of terms such as “global citizenship” and “personal growth” raises questions about what exactly we might measure when evaluating program outcomes (Jorgenson and Schultz 2012: 12; Cameron 2015). Program coordinators also highlighted the difficulty of measuring when so many of the most significant outcomes for students and host partners are, in their words, “intangible”.



Different partners involved in operating these programs may have conflicting ideas about which outcomes are most important to evaluate, and how they are best defined and measured (Nelson and Child 2016). Existing research into student mobility programs has a tendency to focus on critical theory and post-colonial critiques (academic scholarship) or on positive results (self-studies), with a strong bias towards evaluating the experience of students from the Global North (Sherraden et al. 2008). Additional research is needed to capture, understand and validate the perspectives of host-country partners, organizations and communities, particularly from the Global South. Greater attention to long-term research (that links employment outcomes with student mobility) will lead to better understanding of the impacts of student mobility programs, at least as it pertains to career outcomes and labour-force integration of Canadian students.

Lack of tools to evaluate programs institutionally and nationally

One of the greatest technical challenges that universities face is a lack of available and proven-effective mechanisms for evaluating their mobility programs at the institutional-level. Interview participants indicated that it would be extremely valuable for a national member-based organization like Universities Canada to develop and share evaluation tools online. Shared evaluation tools would also facilitate cross-institutional comparisons of evaluation results.

Institutional-level evaluation can also contribute to the development of a national database for Canadian-based student mobility programs, where data on participant information, the nature of programs and their outcomes can be uploaded and shared. Access to a centralized database can facilitate numerous potential benefits including: identifying trends to inform program planning; knowledge of innovative partnership agreements and models; and using national data to market programs and leverage institutional funding. A shared database could also help to facilitate long-term analyses by which Canadian universities can measure their contributions and commitments against national-level data. Equally important are the possibilities for cross-institutional partnerships and collaboration between Canadian institutions facilitated by a national database. As one Manager of International Education put it, “Collaboration is what we are all about as Canadians, or I like to think that is what we are about, and I also think that is the way forward, because we are trying to create global communities and we’ve got to practice what we preach”.

Insufficient knowledge of graduate students’ activities

Graduate student activities are an area where evaluation and measurement is particularly lacking. Graduate students may participate in international course work, internships, field research or pre-departure training, but these activities tend not to fall under the purview of international offices; instead they are the prerogative of individuals and their faculty supervisors. Additionally, as one administrator highlighted, international offices want to reach the broadest possible audience, meaning cohort trips, such as field schools, tend to be their priority student market. Individuals conducting research trips are less often targeted for interaction. To this end, relatively little information exists in Canada regarding the number of graduate students travelling abroad and the impacts of their international learning experiences.



Strategies for Improving Evaluation and Measurement Practice

Centralized models for managing universities' international programs

Increasingly, Canadian universities are moving away from decentralized and hybrid approaches to student mobility and establishing designated international learning offices and consolidating electronic reporting systems as well as student recruitment and training efforts. The benefits of a centralized approach include more effective delivery of programs and communication, improved monitoring and evaluation, and the fact that it supports interdisciplinarity. More precise statistics also help staff and faculty members to report accurately on their activities, challenges and success, which is useful for leveraging funding from upper administration. However, there are numerous challenges of transitioning to a centralized management model. Aside from the expected high cost and technical issues associated with merging previously separate programs and bureaucracies, other challenges include territorialism, resistance to change, and the perception among faculties that resources would be taken away. One administrator explained that faculties must see the value of the international office and the role it has to play in benefiting the entire institution. Centralization of services was considered the most effective strategy for improved data collection.

Institutional collaboration and information sharing around student mobility

In lieu of a national database in Canada, university administrators have taken it upon themselves to develop informal networks where they can share experiences, ask questions and offer each other advice. Two such examples of networks for student travel information software were highlighted in this research:

Horizons User Group

Members from Canadian universities connect semi-annually via web conference to conduct software demos, share information and experiences, and provide collective feedback to Horizons manufacturers. The united front has paid off in that Horizons has changed and added features specifically to satisfy Canadian customers. Institutions considering purchasing Horizons can also join the group to ask questions and gain more information. Individuals interested in joining the group can contact Lise Laporte at lise.laporte@uwo.ca.

The Study Abroad Software List

Student mobility practitioners at Canadian institutions who wish to ask questions and share experience around purchasing and using study abroad software can use this list. Software vendors are not list members. Individuals interested in joining the group can contact Lynne Mitchell at lmitchel@uoguelph.ca.



Additional Resources

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Photo courtesy of Jessica Tourand, participant in the *Students for Development* program in 2013.