

Internationalization at Canadian Universities: Are Students Seeing the Value?

Higher Education Strategy Associates Intelligence Brief 2

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Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) is a Toronto-based firm specializing in research, data and strategy. Our mission is to help universities and colleges compete in the educational marketplace based on quality; to that end we offer our clients a broad range of informational, analytical, evaluative, and advisory services.

The Intelligence Brief series is designed to provide readers with up-to-date insights from our proprietary student panel and our Policy Warehouse.

Introduction

Internationalization in Canadian higher education, as it applies to student mobility, is a dynamic process that includes both out-bound student mobility (i.e. Canadian students spending time abroad in exchange programs) and in-bound student mobility (i.e. international students coming to study in Canada). Over the past few years, Canadian universities have been paying an increasing amount of attention to internationalization of higher education and student mobility. Much of this new interest from higher education institutions stems from an understandable desire to improve students' educational experience; some of it also comes from the recognition that international students can bring in much-needed revenue. This is not so much because these students pay higher tuition fees (since these are usually offset by lower government subsidies) but because in many of the country's less-densely populated regions foreign students represent the major bulwark against demographically-driven enrolment declines.

While in-bound student mobility is what has been catching most of the headlines over the past few years, out-bound student mobility has also been of increasing importance during the past decade or two. A recent study (2007) by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada estimated that the proportion of students studying abroad each year doubled over the past decade, albeit from a fairly low starting point. Universities have been increasingly eager to talk about the educational benefits of study abroad and on-campus internationalization efforts. These benefits are always presented in such a way that they can be justified on economically utilitarian grounds, with globalization (which is usually thought of as an economic process) being the driving force requiring Canada to have graduates with "global perspective, international knowledge and cross cultural skills."

The purpose of this paper is to try to capture some of the views of the people who are both internationalization's beneficiaries and its bankrollers: students. How do they understand internationalization, and what benefits and drawbacks do they see from it? More importantly, perhaps: is it something they would be willing to pay for directly were the costs not hidden within other fees?

Methodology

The data in this report were collected during an online survey conducted by Higher Education Strategy Associates between 5 and 15 August, 2010. This study examines 2742 cases of domestic students aged 18 and older who were enrolled in an undergraduate program in a Canadian degree-granting institution at some point in the 2009-2010 academic year and were returning for study in 2010-2011 (students who graduated in 2010 and international students were excluded from the analysis). Though respondents came from all provinces in Canada, results in this report have been weighted to ensure accurate representation of gender and regional distribution of Canadian university students.

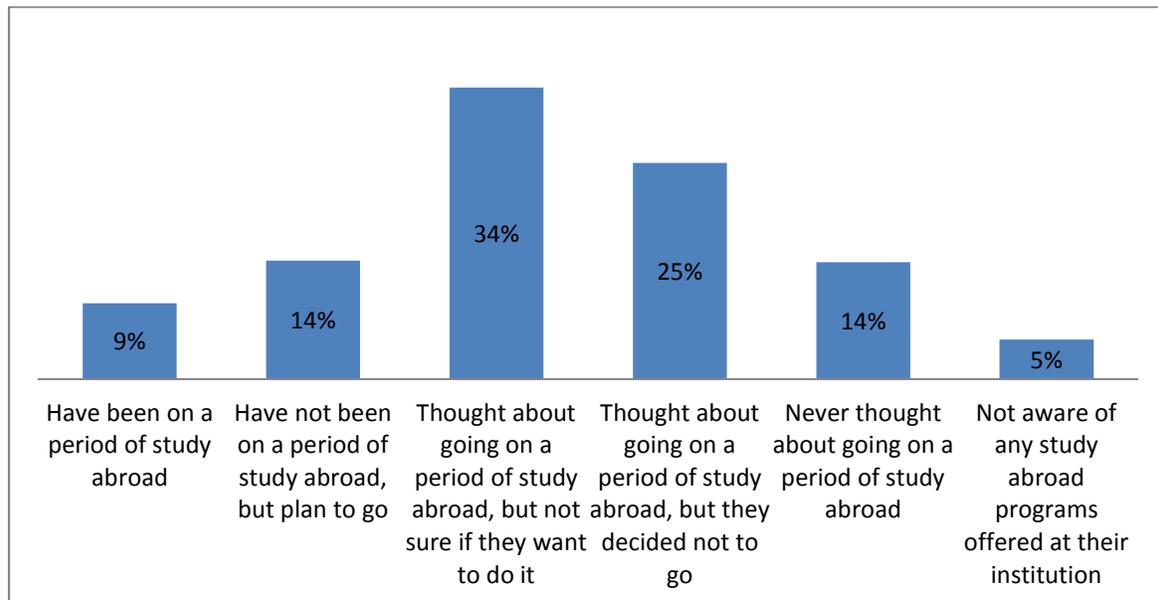
The resulting sample is not a purely random one, as members of the panel must have responded to at least one previous survey administered by Higher Education Strategy Associates or its Canadian Education Project. Because they are not based on random probability samples, the concept of “margin of sampling error” is not applicable. Based on comparisons between our sample and those of other major student surveys such as Statistics Canada’s Youth in Transition Survey, or one of the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium’s three rotating surveys, we are confident that our sample is reasonably representative.

Study-Abroad: Participation, Barriers and Preferences

One possible reason for studying abroad, frequently found in the American literature on the subject, is the chance to visit other countries or to experience other cultures for the first time. However, Canadian University students are very well travelled even before study abroad opportunities, with 78% of the students sampled having lived or travelled outside of Canada or the United States.¹ Even allowing for the fact that a substantial proportion of students are first generation Canadians or come from immigrant families, and allowing for respondents for whom being abroad constitutes a Christmas vacation with parents in Mexico, this is a very substantial figure.

Nine percent of the students surveyed said they had already been on a study abroad program. This is somewhat higher than the figure of two percent, occasionally reported by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada based on data from a survey of institutions in 2006. However, this latter figure is an annual figure, whereas the nine percent cited here represents a total figure to date (on average, respondents were in their third year of study – meaning that if the AUCC results from 2006 were to hold, a figure of six percent might be expected). That still makes the figure from this survey here somewhat on the high side, but given the possibility of increasing rates of studying abroad in the period since 2006 and the possibility that students' study abroad periods had occurred in previous programs of study, the gap is not implausible.

Figure 1: Prior Participation in and Attitudes to Study Abroad



¹ This figure accords relatively well, adjusting for age, with the observations from Project Teen Canada's 2008 survey of 5,564 Canadian teenagers, which found that 52% of Canadian teens had been abroad. See Bibby, R (2009). *The Emerging Millennials: How Canada's Newest generation is Responding to Change and Choice*. Lethbridge: Project Canada Books.

In addition to this, a further 14% of students in the sample say they are making plans to study abroad in the future, and another 34% say they are at least open to considering such a move, as shown above in Figure 1.

Further analysis by the field of study indicates that rates of study abroad are particularly high in Education (13%), Humanities and Social Sciences (both 11%). On the other end of the spectrum, over 40% of students in the fields of Health, Physical and Life Sciences, Math and Computer Sciences and Engineering/Architecture said they had either never considered or had considered and definitively rejected a period of study abroad.

In a further question, we asked students how likely it was that they would obtain a future degree/certificate/diploma from an institution outside Canada. Eight percent said it was very likely that they would do so, and another 18% said it was somewhat likely.

When students were asked about the countries in which they would choose to study if they could, nearly 50% of respondents chose English-speaking countries, with the United Kingdom and Australia being the most popular choices by far. The percentage of students saying they wished to attend schools in some of the world’s rising economic powers were negligible, with just two percent citing China as a desired destination and one percent for India. Full data on countries mentioned as possible study-abroad destinations are listed below in table 1.

Table 1: Country preferences for Study Abroad

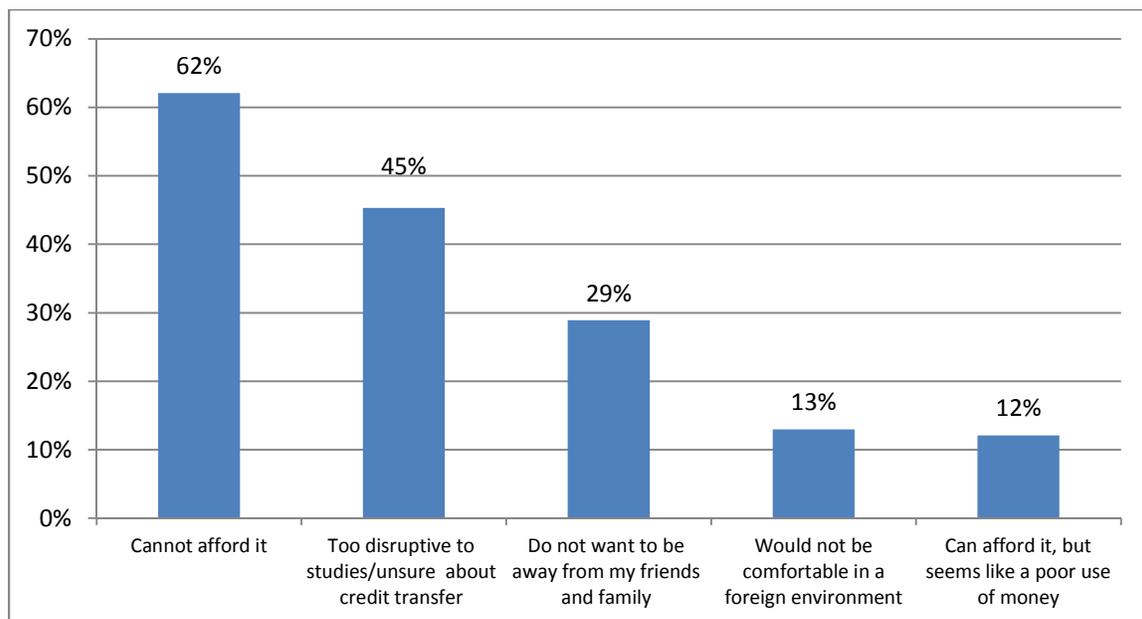
Country	Percent
United Kingdom	21
Australia	15
France	10
Italy	6
USA, Germany, Japan	5 each
Ireland	4
New Zealand, Spain	3 each
China, Switzerland, Greece, Sweden	2 each
The Netherlands, India, South Africa	1 each

When students were asked about the reasons they had *not* gone on a period of study abroad, the most frequently given response, not surprisingly, was cost, with 62% citing this as a reason. High cost was a deterrent in more ways than one – in 12% of cases, students said they could have afforded to go on a term of abroad, but didn’t think it was a wise use of money. In both cases, there was a significant gender gap: women were

more likely than men to cite finances as a reason (66% vs. 56%), but they were also more likely (18% vs. 8%) to say they had money but that study abroad was a bad investment.

The other significant reason for not going abroad was that many (45%) of students thought the process would disrupt their path to graduation because of problems in transferring credit. This was a substantially more important reason for students in Engineering (54%) and Physical Sciences (46%) than it was for students in Social Sciences (27%) and Humanities (30%). Only 13% said they were intimidated by the thought of being in a foreign environment – a figure which was somewhat higher (18%) among first year students.

Figure 2: Reasons for Not Participating in Study Abroad



Views on Global Competencies and Future Employment

One of the major rationales institutions have for expanding the scope of internationalization is that it will give students “international competencies” – that is, it will help develop skills, values and knowledge that equip students to succeed in the global labour market. But do students actually think these competencies are worthwhile?

In our survey, respondents were asked to score the importance of four key international competencies (“knowledge of international affairs,” “ability to work in diverse cultural settings,” “ability to speak languages other than English or French” and “experience in studying or working abroad”) in order to obtain a job after graduation. The results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: How important do you think each of the following are in terms of getting a job after graduation?

	Very Important	Important	Unimportant	Not at all important
Knowledge of international affairs	20%	52%	24%	4%
Ability to work in diverse cultural settings	60%	33%	6%	1%
Ability to speak languages other than English or French	19%	39%	35%	7%
Experience in studying or working abroad	17%	37%	37%	9%

Overall, students were nearly uniform in indicating that the “ability to work in diverse cultural settings” was important in terms of getting a job, with 93% agreeing that this was important or very important.² “Knowledge of international affairs” was also seen as important or very important by 72%. Students put less emphasis on learning a language other than English and French or experience studying or working abroad with only 58% and 54%, respectively, regarding these as key to getting jobs after graduation.

² “Diversity” of settings, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. In the 2011 Globe and Mail CUR survey, 49% of students gave their own institution a 9 out of 10 or higher for having a diverse student body, and 66% gave them 8 out of 10 or higher. In that light, it’s possible to interpret this nearly unanimous answer to mean “it’s important to be able to work in organizations as culturally diverse as a Canadian university.” This standard might not, it should be said, find universal acceptance as benchmark for diversity in the global business environment.

Women, on average, attribute higher scores to all of these factors in the job market than men do. The exception was “studying and working abroad”, where the gender gap was only one percentage point. All other question responses had gender gaps of between eight and nine percentage points. Similarly, students in Humanities and Social Sciences are likelier to give greater weight to these factors than are student in mathematics or engineering. This may simply be explained by the nature of careers that each field of study offers. For example, it does not come as a surprise that students enrolled in math, engineering or physical/life sciences would not perceive knowledge of current affairs or knowing languages other than English and/or French as important factors in obtaining a job. Intriguingly, however, students in Business and Commerce – a field which allegedly is at the forefront of globalization – do not appear to put any special emphasis on any of these “international competencies” as a prerequisite for getting a job.

Of course, the perception that international competencies – particularly the ones that are especially expensive or time consuming such as learning a new language or actually working/studying abroad – might well be related to the fact that only a minority of students believe that they are likely to ever actually work abroad. In fact, only 35% of respondents agreed with the statement “in order to be successful in my future career, I will have to spend some time working outside of Canada”.

This figure, however, disguises some fairly large differences between fields of study. Fully 49% of students in Visual and Performing Arts/ Fine Arts, said they agreed with the statement (perhaps because Canada is not necessarily a place where artists can make their names), students in Engineering/Architecture had the next highest level of agreement at 41%. Conversely, only, 21% of participants enrolled in Education and Health programs – two professions which for the most part are funded by provincial governments – said they felt the need to work abroad in order to be successful in their careers. The gap based on language used at home was perhaps more striking; among those who speak English at home, only 29% think working abroad will be a key to their success, for those who speak French as a mother tongue the figure is 39% and among those who speak a language other than English or French, the figure is 61%.

Believing that one’s future success depends on working abroad has, it transpires, a major correlation with students’ belief in the importance of international competencies – more so, indeed, than the act of having previously spent time studying abroad.

Table 3: Impact of Views on Working Abroad and Previous International Study on Views of International Competencies

	Knowledge of Int'l Affairs Important	Diversity Important	Ability to Speak Languages Important	Experience Working/ Studying Abroad important
Believe Must Work Abroad to Succeed	81%	94%	71%	74%
Do not Believe Must Work Abroad to Succeed	66%	91%	50%	44%
Have Been on Study Abroad	76%	93%	69%	74%
Have not Been on Study Abroad	71%	92%	57%	53%

Canadian Students' Views on International Students on Campus

Internationalization is not a one-way street: it involves bringing students from overseas to Canada, as well as sending our own students abroad. Questions regarding the presence of foreign students on Canadian campuses were therefore also included in the survey. The results of these questions are shown below in Table 4.

Table 4: Opinions on International Students

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Having international students in class enhances educational experience	25%	46%	23%	6%
International students feel welcomed on my campus and are well-integrated with campus social life	35%	53%	10%	2%
Having international students in Canadian institutions increases Canada's competitiveness and makes the country a stronger player on the global and political stage	34%	48%	15%	3%
International students are taking opportunities away from Canadian students	7%	16%	44%	34%

Generally speaking, Canadian university students indicate they appreciate the benefits that international students bring to Canadian campuses. By a margin of roughly 2.5 to 1, students agree with the statement that international students enhance the in-class experience. By a margin of over 4 to 1, students think that hosting more international students enhances Canada's competitiveness and its "soft power." And by almost 7 to 1 they think that foreign students are welcomed and well-integrated in campus life.

As with many of the questions we have examined in this survey, there are some significant gender gaps here, the largest being where women are substantially more likely (75% vs. 67%) to agree with the statement about international students enhancing the educational experience. The larger differences in student opinion actually seem to be related to field of study. Agreement with the statement that international students improve the educational experience varies between 80% in Education and Fine/Performing Arts and 59% in Math and Computer Science.

It should not be assumed, however, that international students are universally seen in a positive light. Nearly a quarter of students surveyed agreed with the statement that “international students are taking opportunities away from Canadian students,” a feeling that was more prevalent among men than women (26% vs. 20%). With respect to field of study, there were very notable differences in the frequency with which this feeling was articulated, which in a rough way at least seemed to be positively correlated to areas where foreign students themselves are most prevalent. The sentiment was highest, for instance, in Mathematics and Computer Science (29%), and lowest in Fine Arts (9%), with Humanities, Social Sciences and Agriculture all coming in slightly below average (19%).

Conclusions

One final and more direct way to see what students think about internationalization is to ask them whether or not they would be prepared to pay for more of it. Survey respondents were therefore asked a hypothetical question on how they would react if their Dean proposed that all students should have a fully paid-for term abroad as an integral part of their program, but also proposed raising tuition by \$2000 per year to pay for it. 20% of respondents said they would support this, while 80% said they would not.

Viewed from one perspective, this is a resounding vote against internationalization: four out of five students simply are not willing to pay for study abroad. But from another perspective, this can be portrayed as a massive endorsement. An extra \$2000 in tuition would effectively amount to an increase of almost 40% increase in tuition fees; given consistently low student support for tuition hikes, this may actually imply that many students that might otherwise object would support tuition increases if put towards study abroad.

The ambivalence of this result is mirrored by many other complex and paradoxical results already noted in this study. For instance:

- Students in Education programs are the most likely to have spent time abroad but at the same time Education students are the least likely to think of working abroad as crucial to their career success;
- The international competencies students are mostly likely to see as crucial to future working success tend to be the competencies that least require time abroad;
- The international competency students seem to value most highly is “ability to work in diverse settings” yet the most prized destinations for study abroad are mostly in Anglophone countries (50% of total) with the next most common being France (10%).

It is clear that there is support for the *general* notion of international competencies, as long as it relates to motherhood topics like “diversity”, and as long as the destination is somewhere like the UK or Australia, where language is not an issue and the culture is recognizably similar. But as the degree of challenge increases, so too does resistance to the implications of internationalization. Thus, where international students are most common (in Computer Science and Engineering), we also have the highest levels of concern about the impact of international students. When internationalization requires extra investments of time (i.e. acquiring a new language) or money, support falls off – presumably because the perceived value of such investments isn’t as high as is sometimes supposed.

There is certainly a substantial minority of students, disproportionately drawn from among those who believe that their future career prospects depend upon successful spells of working abroad, for whom “deep” internationalization (that is, learning new languages, studying abroad outside the Anglosphere and acquiring skills that will help them to succeed in the constantly changing world being prepared to pay for the experience) is of interest. These students are likely to view increased institutional commitment to internationalization in a very positive light. But for a much larger group of students, the appeal of internationalization does not appear to be much more than skin

deep. For them, increasing commitments in internationalization might actually come to be seen as a turn-off.

Faced with this, institutions wishing to pursue a more aggressive or comprehensive internationalization strategy might wish to be more upfront with prospective students about the institution's intent to pursue a global focus. They could deliberately seek to attract students who are interested in "deep" internationalization and – perhaps more importantly – implicitly encourage people who are less interested or even feel threatened by some aspects of internationalization to go elsewhere.

For institutions with more modest goals in terms of internationalization, it may be still be worthwhile to at least re-examine the way internationalization is marketed on campuses. For instance, they could ensure that the labour market and skills acquisition benefits of foreign study are promoted, rather than just (as seems too often to be the case) their "see-the-world-and-get-a-couple-of-credits-into-the-bargain" aspects. Institutions could also be more pro-active in dealing with possible resistance to internationalization, particularly if more international students are going to be arriving on campuses.



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