



Employment and
Social Development Canada

Exploring barriers to accessing study and work abroad opportunities

Executive Summary

Prepared for Employment and Social Development Canada

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Canada 

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Supplier name: Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc.

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This public opinion research report presents the results of qualitative research conducted to explore barriers to accessing study and work abroad opportunities for traditionally underrepresented post-secondary students.

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Executive Summary

Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by the Learning Branch of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to conduct qualitative public opinion research (POR) in support of the Department's Outbound Student Mobility Pilot.

1. Research Purpose and Objectives

Studies have found that studying abroad increases employability (Universities UK International, 2017) and has a positive impact on the development of requisite skills, including adaptability and communication skills (Canadian Bureau for International Education, *A World of Learning*, 2014). To encourage more Canadian students to study or work abroad as part of their post-secondary studies, Budget 2019 announced the Outbound Student Mobility Pilot. Led by ESDC, the goal of the Pilot is to help Canadian post-secondary students gain the skills needed to succeed in a global economy through study and work abroad opportunities.

To support the Pilot's design and success, research was needed to better understand barriers to study and/or work abroad opportunities for Canadian students. The Learning Branch of ESDC commissioned Phoenix SPI to conduct POR to help build a better understanding of the barriers that traditionally underrepresented students encounter when it comes to studying or working abroad. The purpose of the research was to explore awareness, habits, attitudes, and behaviours related to study and/or work abroad opportunities, including barriers faced by traditionally underrepresented students.

2. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to meet the objectives. Specifically, 12 online focus groups and 20 in-depth, one-on-one telephone interviews were conducted with the target population: Canadian undergraduate university and college students, 18 years of age or older, attending a designated Canadian post-secondary institution. The target population was segmented into two groups: students who had participated in a study or work abroad program and students who had not participated in such a program, but who were interested in doing so. The research was designed to include students from a variety of backgrounds, including students traditionally underrepresented in post-secondary education (i.e., students from lower-income households, students with disabilities, and Indigenous students).

Third-party intermediaries, such as Universities Canada (UnivCan), Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan), the National Educational Association of Disabled Students, Indspire and various Canadian post-secondary institutions, were engaged to promote the study to potentially eligible students using online and social media advertisements. Recruitment started in early March 2020. By mid-March, recruitment was put on hold due to COVID-19 and resumed in September 2020. The focus groups and interviews were conducted between September 7 and November 5, 2020.¹ All participants received an honorarium in appreciation of their time. More details about the methodology can be found in the [Appendix: Technical Specifications](#).

3. Limitations and Use of the Research Results

This research was qualitative not quantitative. Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations rather than to measure what percentage of the target population holds a

¹ One interview was conducted in March (on March 26, 2020) prior to work stoppage due to COVID-19.

given opinion. As such, the results indicate participants' views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population of students who participated in study/work abroad programs or who are interested in participating in such programs. With the foregoing in mind, the results of this research will be used by ESDC to inform policy approaches to increase the participation of underrepresented students in the new Outbound Student Mobility Pilot.

4. Key Findings

The opportunity to travel abroad was most often identified as the main (or key) factor motivating post-secondary students to want to take part in study or work abroad programs.

When asked why they wanted (or would like) to take part in a study or work abroad program, research participants frequently mentioned the opportunity to travel. They often used expressions like 'a great opportunity', 'a unique opportunity', 'the opportunity of a lifetime', and 'a once in a lifetime opportunity' to describe it. Not only does this afford students the opportunity to travel internationally, but it also allows them to do so in a 'safe', 'structured', or 'supervised' environment (e.g., through an international study program) and, for many, to travel at a period in their life before they take on responsibilities, such as a full-time job and a family.

Students identified a number of benefits they hoped or expected to derive from being involved in a study or work abroad program. These included benefits both to themselves on a personal level and to their academic studies and/or career plans.

The benefits research participants identified that pertain to their character as individuals included: life skills development, such as independence, initiative, self-confidence, and learning to interact with people cross-culturally; better self-understanding, including being able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses; and personal growth, such as widening their horizons by discovering new interests and acquiring new perspectives by travelling abroad.

When it came to their academic or professional selves, students mentioned benefits, such as acquiring a deeper understanding of their field of study or work by experiencing it in a different setting/seeing it from a different perspective; making professional connections and enhancing their employability; acquiring or improving career-related skills, such as language skills; and strengthening their CV with the ability to reference experience working/studying abroad.

Finances, administrative issues, and culture shock were identified by students as the main factors complicating the decision-making process when considering participating in a study or work abroad program.

Financial considerations were routinely identified as important to taking part in a study or work abroad program. Such considerations were typically part of the thought process informing the decision whether or not to apply for the program, with program participants routinely identifying them as a key factor informing their decision, and non-participants routinely identifying them as a key factor in dissuading them from taking part.

Other barriers or difficulties complicating the decision-making process included administrative challenges and apprehensions about culture shock. Looking first at administrative challenges, students pointed to the complexity of the administrative and logistical requirements, which were sometimes compounded by a perceived lack of institutional support. Such complexities were routinely associated with three specific issues: choosing courses at the host institution; applying for a visa; and finding housing abroad, with

participants often observing that they had to deal with these issues on their own or with little assistance from their institution or the host institution.

Although mentioned by fewer students, concern and anxiety about encountering cultural barriers when studying or working abroad was a complicating factor in the decision-making process for a number of research participants. This was routinely associated with a potential language barrier and uncertainty about the extent to which they would be able to get by speaking English.

Students collectively identified a variety of barriers or obstacles resulting from COVID-19 that someone might face when it comes to being involved in a study or work abroad program.

After discussing the challenges and barriers to accessing study and work abroad opportunities, research participants were asked to consider the impact of COVID-19. Challenges and barriers related to the pandemic included the curtailment or cancellation of programs; travel restrictions (e.g., countries closing their borders/no longer issuing visas, institutions withdrawing from international exchange programs); new and/or additional program or travel requirements (e.g., more stringent requirements to obtain visas, mandatory vaccination should a vaccine be available, the imposition of travel restrictions while in host countries); and financial strain, such as increased travel costs (assuming travel to other countries is permitted), as well as job loss and/or a lack of employment opportunities (resulting in loss of income to finance participation in a study or work abroad program).

Most research participants were of the opinion that awareness of study/work abroad programs is relatively widespread among students, but that this awareness is general in nature.

When asked to consider what could be done to ensure students are aware of study and work abroad programs, research participants tended to focus on the channels used to disseminate information, including social media, student emails, kiosks/booths at key events (e.g., orientation week, international fairs), and advertising in high traffic areas on campus. It was also suggested that this information should be disseminated early during recruitment efforts in high schools, during campus visits by prospective students, and during the very first weeks of the school year. Finally, to ensure study and work abroad opportunities remain top-of-mind for students throughout their academic career, more frequent dissemination of information was identified as something that would help; the two preferred channels were social media and email.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Students involved in this research identified the opportunity to travel as a key attraction of study/work abroad programming. Therefore, the direction that study/work abroad programs take in the post-pandemic environment will need to address two key challenges related to travel.

First, to the extent that post-secondary institutions turn to online delivery, or consider doing so in the post-pandemic environment, one challenge will be to highlight the benefits and advantages of a program shorn of one of its key attractions (i.e., the opportunity to travel). Potential advantages of an online approach, or virtual mobility, include its capacity to address, perhaps even eliminate, key barriers to participation in the program identified by students: financial barriers, apprehensions about culture shock, anxiety/fear of loneliness, and concerns about delayed graduation or falling behind in one's domestic course of study while abroad. The question in the absence of travel will be the extent to which eliminating such barriers at the price of eliminating the travel component makes participation in the program more

or less attractive. With this in mind, particular attention should be paid to the perceived advantages and positive aspects of virtual mobility when marketing such programming to students.

Second, when the travel component of study/work abroad programs is relaunched in a post-pandemic environment, the challenge will be to develop tools, resources, and services to address specific concerns expressed by students about such programs. This includes concerns about being abroad during a new outbreak, and additional administrative requirements related to international travel in general and study/work abroad programs in particular.

Addressing concerns about being abroad during a new outbreak will be particularly important for two key reasons: loneliness/homesickness was one of the most frequently identified drawbacks about their experience abroad, and anxiety/fear was identified as one of the most important potential barriers to participation. Such concerns would undoubtedly be heightened or enhanced if apprehensions related to a new outbreak, such as being quarantined abroad and not being able to get back home, were not adequately addressed.

Concerns about additional administrative requirements will also be important to address. One of the most frequently identified 'complicators' in the decision-making process was the complexity of administrative and logistical requirements. Given students' perceptions that existing requirements are complex, and that students are often left to deal with them on their own, it will be essential to try to find ways to minimize potential complications resulting from any additional administrative or logistical requirements in a post-pandemic environment.

Future areas of research for consideration include, but are not limited to, virtual mobility, incentivization, and marketing. First, research could be used to help develop virtual programming (i.e., what such a program could look like for participants) and to determine what incentives, if any, are needed to account for the loss of the travel experience (i.e., how to motivate student participation in absence of travel, a key attraction of study/work abroad programs). Second, research could help identify the best way(s) to market virtual study/work abroad programs to students, both those predisposed to travel/work abroad and those who might not have given any consideration to the benefits of such a program, especially given COVID-19.

6. Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify, as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives, that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.



Alethea Woods, President, Phoenix SPI

7. Contract Value

The contract value was \$112,805.66 (tax included).