



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

International Experience Canada (IEC) 2019-20 Employer Study Final Report

Prepared for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of 60 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted by Earncliffe Strategy Group on behalf of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The research was conducted in February and March of 2020.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Enquête de 2019-2020 auprès des employeurs du programme Expérience internationale Canada.

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Executive summary

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present the following report to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) summarizing the results of in-depth interview testing of the International Experience Canada (IEC) employer study.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) mandates the International Experience Canada (IEC) program which gives youth (18-35) the opportunity to travel and work in one of their partner countries. As a bilateral program it also allows foreign youth the opportunity to travel and work in Canada. In order to ensure the program's success IEC implemented a targeted stakeholder engagement and promotion plan aimed at increasing awareness of the opportunities abroad and increasing Canadian youth participation. The research will be used to inform policy, targeted engagement and overall promotion of the program. The total cost to conduct this research was \$69,996.13 including HST.

The objectives of the research were to evaluate employers' and hiring managers' views of international work experience and to seek insights that would support IEC in its engagement and promotion of the program among target audiences.

To meet these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a series of 60 in-depth interviews with employers and hiring managers across Canada between February 6th and March 6th, 2020. The interviews were conducted in both English (50) and French (10) and averaged 30 minutes in length.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Interview research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved, the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn, and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

The key findings from the research are presented below.

- While employers prioritize relevant experience, education and required certifications or licenses, there were other attributes and elements, such as soft skills, flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, and communication skills that they admitted often helped them distinguish among candidates who meet all of the key criteria.
- The tendency for those who have not hired people with the kind of international experience gained while traveling as a youth, was to assume that the information would not likely be shared with them unless it was directly related to the position for which the person was applying. Many wondered how they would even know if someone had IEC-type experience.
- Impressions of how this sort of international experience might affect someone's candidacy tended to be mixed. Some inferred that they would find the experience uniquely valuable, but initial thoughts were sometimes less enthusiastic. If the participant was thinking of foreign workers who gained experience working in Canada, the assumptions were generally that the experience was valuable for the individual and often beneficial to the employer. However, when considering Canadians who have gone abroad, particularly if the experience was during their youth, some felt this was valuable character development, but others initially wondered how the experience could matter to their hiring.

- For many, the initial response on the value of the experience was that it would depend on the nature of international experience: the specific work the individual did or the kind of company for which they worked; the part of the world in which they gained the experience; and/or, whether it was career-oriented or more of a leisure trip. Some unprompted benefits mentioned were self-sufficiency, independence, problem-solving skills and soft skills.
- None felt IEC-type experience implied anything negative about the individual, however some indicated that citing international work experience as proof of qualifications for certain jobs may, at times, be insufficient or inappropriate.
- Employers tended to say IEC-type experience was not something they usually looked out for and almost all were reluctant to say IEC-type experience would result in higher compensation in any initial offer, but many said it would help an applicant get noticed or short-listed; thus boosting a candidate's odds of being offered employment.
- Of the small number of participants (perhaps 2-3) who indicated they already hire youth coming to Canada under these kinds of arrangements, the existence of this type of program was appreciated and the value to their organization was fairly high. Typically, this was for seasonal employment in the hospitality service industry. These employers indicated some unique advantages of hiring these foreign youth including their work ethic, customer-relationship skills, and ability to help recruit more valuable foreign employees in their situation.
- When prompted with a list of nine specific traits or attributes, nearly all participants agreed that IEC-type experience would significantly improve someone's cultural awareness and most agreed that one's adaptability would also be significantly improved. The assumption was often that an individual who decided to go to the length of working abroad, even working while traveling, demonstrates a level of personal commitment and a requirement for that individual to make their own success happen.
- In terms of the awareness of programs, most were unaware of them. Some did indicate having some knowledge, but in many of these cases, further probing revealed they were not thinking of the right kind of program. For example, it was often confused for processes relating to temporary foreign worker visas.
- Given a brief introduction to International Experience Canada (IEC), reactions ranged from mildly positive to quite enthusiastic support. It was clear that for many employers, the benefits of youth gaining IEC-type experience was valuable, if positioned appropriately. Raising the profile of the program, encouraging alumni to ensure the experience was included on their resumes, and improving the ability for employers to know or contact alumni may be the kinds of efforts that could help ensure the experience was leveraged optimally and to the mutual benefit of employers and alumni.
- Many employers indicated that, if brought to their attention as evidence of a self-driven, character-building, initiative, it would be compelling evidence of the long-term promise of the individual that could certainly improve the chances of being offered employment, assuming they adequately met all other qualifications.

Research Firm: Earnscliffe Strategy Group Inc. (Earnscliffe)

Contract Number: B8815-200121/001/CY

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I hereby certify as a Representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government

of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephanie Constable". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Date: March 13, 2020
Stephanie Constable
Principal, Earnscliffe

Introduction

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present the following report to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) summarizing the results of in-depth interviews conducted for the International Experience Canada (IEC) employer study.

IRCC wishes to increase participation of Canadian youth in their mandated International Experience Canada (IEC) Program. The bilateral program gives Canadian youth (18-35) the opportunity to travel and work in one of their partner countries, it also allows foreign youth the opportunity to travel and work in Canada. In order to ensure the program's success IEC implemented a targeted stakeholder engagement and promotion plan aimed at increasing awareness of the opportunities abroad and increasing Canadian youth participation. The research findings will be used to inform policy, targeted engagement and promotion strategies aimed at increasing Canadian youth awareness of and participation in, the IEC program.

The research set out to evaluate employers' and hiring managers' views of international work experience and to seek insights that will support IEC in its engagement and promotion of the program with its target audiences.

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- Understand the perceived benefits of international work experience when making hiring decisions, looking both at Canadians upon their return from an international experience, and foreign nationals in Canada on an IEC visa;
- Explore attitudes toward a suite of related or indirect competencies that may be gained by employees with these kinds of international experience; and,
- Investigate awareness of the IEC, or similar, programs of the among Canadian employers;

Research Approach

To meet these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a series of sixty in-depth interviews with Canadian employers and hiring managers across Canada by telephone. A total of 10 interviews were conducted in French including one interview with a French-speaking participant living outside of Quebec. The interviews were conducted between February 6th and March 6th and were an average of 30 minutes in length. Participants were given an honorarium of \$150 as a token of appreciation for their time.

Interviewees were recruited through our subcontractor, Decision Point, using their proprietary database of Canadian business executives. This database includes 5,000 executives with profiling on a range of attributes including industry sector, number of employees, annual revenues, etc. The interviews were stratified by business size and across industry sectors to ensure the final sample was representative of the Canadian workforce, as per the tables below. Further, careful consideration was made to ensure representation of businesses across Canada, and, not just the larger urban centers.

Given the accelerated timeline, four moderators were used to conduct the interviews although the majority of the initial nineteen interviews were conducted by the Project Leads. In our experience, there is also value in using multiple moderators (within reason) as it ensures that no single moderator develops early conclusions. Each moderator takes notes and summarizes their interviews and the moderators debrief regularly to discuss the functionality of the interview guide; any issues relating to recruitment, responsiveness; and key findings including noting instances where they were unique and where they were similar to previous interviews. Together, they

discuss the findings both on an ongoing basis in order to allow for probing of areas that require further investigation in subsequent groups and before the final results are reported.

Finally, given the complexity of this study, and our uncertainty about the relevant experience of interviewees with employees with IEC-type experiences, we recommended the interviews be conducted in two waves. The plan was to conduct an initial twenty interviews followed by a meeting to debrief on the findings to ensure we were probing in the ways that would be most beneficial to IRCC especially where experience was limited. This measure proved very helpful and resulted in modifications that helped ensure the target audience was clearly understood and defined and that the information gathered would meet the objectives of the study. Specifically, the guide was changed to include a more specific definition of what qualified as IEC-type experience, as well as, the addition of probing questions to understand how an employer might value this type of experience.

Exhibit 1: Stratification of Business Sectors (number of interviews)

Business sector	Small businesses (5-99 employees)	Medium businesses (100-499 employees)	Large businesses (500+ employees)
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	2	-	-
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas	-	-	1
Utilities	-	-	1
Construction	3	1	1
Manufacturing	1	1	2
Wholesale trade	1	1	1
Retail trade	3	1	-
Transportation and warehousing	2	1	1
Information and cultural industries	1	-	1
Finance and insurance	2	-	1
Real estate and rental and leasing	1	-	1
Professional, scientific and technical services	4	1	1
Management of companies and enterprises	-	-	2
Administrative support, waste management and remediation services	-	1	1
Educational services	1	-	2
Health care and social assistance	2	1	1
Arts, entertainment and recreation	1	1	-
Accommodation and food services	3	1	1
Other services	3	-	-
Public administration	-	1	1
Total	30	11	19

Exhibit 2: Variation of Employer Location

City and Province	Number of interviews
Toronto, ON	12
Ottawa, ON	3
Kitchener, ON	2
Aurora, ON	1
Ancaster, ON	1
Hamilton, ON	1
Simcoe, ON	1
GTA, ON	1
Mississauga, ON	1
Richmond Hill, ON	1
Orangeville, ON	1
Montreal, QC	9
Vancouver, BC	5
Surrey, BC	2
Squamish, BC	1
Richmond, BC	1
Deroche, BC	1
Calgary, AB	8
Lethbridge, AB	1
Edmonton, AB	1
Saskatoon, SK	1
Winnipeg, MB	2
Halifax, NS	1
Goffs, NS	1
Cap-Pelé, NB	1
Total	60

Appended to this report is the screener and discussion guide.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn, and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

Detailed findings

This qualitative report is divided into three sections: the first explores participants’ impressions of employees with international work experience; the second examines participants’ awareness and understanding of international work programs; and the third section evaluates participants’ communication needs.

Except where specifically identified, the findings represent the combined results regardless of business size or sector and for both English and French.

Also, given the complexity of this study, and our uncertainty about the relevant experience of interviewees with employees with IEC-type experiences, we recommended the interviews be conducted in two waves. We conducted an initial nineteen interviews to ensure we were probing in the ways that would be most beneficial to IRCC especially where experience was limited. This measure proved very helpful and resulted in modifications that helped ensure the target audience was clearly understood and defined and that the information gathered would meet the objectives of the study. Specifically, the guide was changed to include a more specific definition of what qualified as IEC-type experience, as well as, the addition of probing questions to understand how an employer might value this type of experience.

Experience with Employees with International Experience

The interviews began with an initial discussion to gauge participants’ experience hiring employees with international experience. This provided useful context in terms of understanding employers’ experience with the specific international experience of interest for this study and also helped ensure the remaining questions were framed accordingly.

To gauge participants’ levels of experience with IEC-type employees, participants were initially asked whether they had a lot, a little, or no experience hiring the following two types of employees:

- Individuals from outside Canada who have come here to work temporarily; or,
- Canadians who have worked, studied, or volunteered abroad i.e. who had worked while traveling in another country, perhaps as part of a program such as a “working holiday”, a “youth exchange”. The kind of program which allows a youth to get a special work permit that is exempt from the usual process required for obtaining a visa to be employed in another country.

The initial 19 interviews resulted in a little under half describing themselves as having “a lot” of experience hiring employees with international experience coming from other countries; only half as many have that level of experience hiring Canadians who have gained experience internationally. When probed, however, it was clear that most of the experience did not relate to the kinds of visas of particular interest in this study.

When thinking about “international experience,” the default for many was to think and talk about international workers. Experience along these lines included landed immigrants or people who have become Canadian citizens and had previously gained experience in another country. Some of it was hiring workers in other countries for postings in their own country. Some of the experience with Canadians was confused with posting existing Canadian employees elsewhere, as opposed to hiring candidates with international experience.

Upon completion of the 60 interviews, only a small number of participants reported hiring Canadians with international experience, though, upon further probing, it became clear that likely only five or six had the specific experience level sought after in this study.

Interestingly, however, most explained that they were not sure how they would come to understand this about a potential candidate arguing that IEC-type experience does not figure prominently on the resumes of prospective employees; especially those of Canadians with international experience. Some also wondered whether their industry was not necessarily attractive for people with IEC-type experiences.

Finally, as the sample for this study was intentionally broad to reflect the natural distribution of businesses by size and type across the country, the needs of employers ranged widely, making it harder to draw conclusions about commonality. This exercise was very good for understanding the diversity of perspectives among employers overall but produced only pockets of small numbers of participants who most likely value or have any exposure to the kind of international experience that was narrowly defined as International Experience Canada (IEC). As a result, much of the findings relate to impressions and expectations rather than actual directly relevant experiences.

Impressions of Employees with International Experience

Once we had established participants’ levels of experience hiring employees with international experience, we then moved to a general discussion about what employers look for in employees, how international experience figures in those searches, and their impressions of employees with international experience.

Our conversations began with a general question about what employers look for when hiring employees. Overall most indicated that, for long-term positions, experience was the highest priority. Other top of mind responses included: education, language, communication, understanding, and attitude. When thinking of entry-level positions, many cited traits such as: being flexible; a team player; ability/eagerness to learn; having a strong work ethic; and, being reliable as very important characteristics. It was evident that for the majority of hiring managers, the goal was to ensure a candidate had a proven track record to ensure success.

Exhibit 3: When hiring, what do you look for in employees?

Words mentioned by most employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience
Words mentioned by some employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Language • Flexible • Attitude • Communication • Certifications • Understanding • Ability to learn • Skill set • Availability • Reliability • Soft skills • Ability to grow • Drive • Independent • Organized • Team player • Work ethic

<p>Words mentioned by a few employers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality • Cognitive skills • Strong • Mature • Aptitude • Honesty • Integrity • Entrepreneurial skills • Potential • Critical thinking • Reasoning • Writing skills • Perspective • Talented • Committed • Passionate
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Of the few who had experience hiring employees with IEC-type experience, this international experience was not always top of mind. For those who said it was top of mind, they described international employees as being more motivated, educated, and hardworking. For those who said it was not top of mind, when asked, they tended to say that it was definitely a positive and intriguing characteristic, but not necessarily a job requirement.

When asked how this sort of international experience might affect someone’s candidacy, initial views tended to be mixed. While some inferred that they found the experience uniquely valuable, initial thoughts tended to be less enthusiastic.

When thinking of foreign workers who gained experience working in Canada, the assumptions were generally that the experience was valuable for the individual and often beneficial to the employer. Positive observations that employers made about candidates with IEC-type experience included: perspective, worldly, mobile, team player, hardworking, ambitious, educated, and mature. Negative observations tended to relate to the temporary nature of IEC-type experience and perceived language barriers.

When considering Canadians who have gone abroad, particularly if the experience was during their youth, some felt this was valuable character development, but others initially wondered how the experience could matter to their hiring. Some participants also felt that this international experience could be interpreted as a sort of privilege; therefore, not necessarily a valuable experience although interesting.

And, when asked whether those with experience hiring employees with IEC-type experience had noticed any differences between employees who worked versus studied or volunteered, most did feel that there were differences. As employers, most seemed to value practical work experience as it demonstrated the individual was trying to gain experience that they could bring to the workforce. Alternatively, volunteer experience seemed to also be preferred over studies, as it was equated to working which demonstrated a certain level of dedication, responsibility and commitment.

For many, the initial response to the question about the value of the experience was that it would depend on the nature of international experience, such as: the specific work the individual did; the kind of company for which

they worked; the part of the world in which they gained the experience; and/or, whether it was career-oriented or more of a leisure trip.

When probed further as to whether IEC-type experience would be seen as advantages or disadvantages, opinions again varied. For example, some participants, often those working in the trades industries, felt it would be an advantage because they imagined the employee would bring knowledge of different systems and processes to bear; whereas, others in the trades industries, saw it as a negative as it could be cause for mistakes and misinterpretations.

“One of our international employees has shown us new ways that they do drilling in Africa because they don’t have the water resources that we have, and it has helped us adapt and learn new things.” – (Small business, Construction)

“I heard of these engineers who messed up a quarter billion dollar satellite project because they neglected to convert to the metric system. For me, it is a disadvantage as these individuals are used to different standards which may not be a big deal but with this industry it could make them more likely to screw up.” – (Small business, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services)

“I can see it being an advantage and a disadvantage. In terms of safety laws, it’s a disadvantage and could work against them because they have to have a good grasp of Canadian regulations; however, knowledge of how the industry works in other countries, is an advantage.” – (Small business, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation)

As the discussion unfolded, it became clear that the consensus was that a Canadian who chooses to go abroad and work in another country almost certainly goes through some valuable character-forming experiences and develops in some highly desirable ways.

“I think getting out of your comfort zone, travelling, having to develop new networks etc. requires a certain level of commitment and tenacity. You have to do a lot of research and you have to put yourself out there. I think that in and of itself is beneficial for people, especially younger people.” – (Medium business, Construction)

Even before prompting on specific characteristics, participants were asked to volunteer ways that a person may be positively impacted by having pursued IEC-type experience in their youth (provided the candidate did so to gain experience, or knowledge by working/studying/volunteering and the experience was not purely for pleasure or entertainment). Interestingly, many of the characteristics that they volunteered align with the qualities they said they look for in employees (beyond their specific qualifications). They included:

- Self-sufficiency;
- Independence;
- Problem-solving;
- Soft skills in terms of getting along with people, being diplomatic, understanding;
- A greater appreciation for the different ways people think and work;
- An ability to be flexible and adapt to new, challenging or changing circumstances;
- A greater ability to work in a diverse workplace;
- Leadership skills; and,
- Language abilities (particularly if they relate to non-official languages that are relevant to the business’ market or operations), depending on the individual and part of the world in which they worked.

Prompted with a list of nine specific traits or attributes, participants were asked how significantly they believe each improves or diminishes in those who have IEC-type experience.

Exhibit 4: For each of the following traits/competencies that may matter to an employer, please tell me whether you believe this sort of international experience likely improves significantly, improves somewhat, diminishes somewhat, diminishes significantly or has no impact on their development in this area compared to people without that sort of experience.

	Improves significantly	Improves somewhat	No impact	Diminishes somewhat	Diminishes significantly	DK/NR
Cultural awareness	39	10	3	3	0	5
Adaptability	33	17	5	0	1	4
Language proficiency	18	15	14	5	1	7
Learning/Capacity to learn	17	19	17	2	0	5
Being a team player	14	12	25	1	0	8
Strategic thinking	10	18	25	1	0	6
Work ethic	9	23	18	1	1	8
Entrepreneurial skills	3	22	24	0	0	11
Corporate financial performance	0	14	39	1	0	6

The results show that, whether or not an employer has any experience hiring employees with IEC-type experience, there was consensus that international experience likely benefits candidates in a few important ways:

- The majority of participants felt that IEC-type experience would improve someone’s cultural awareness and adaptability;
- Most felt that one’s work ethic, language proficiency or capacity to learn in general would be improved at least somewhat;
- Opinion was more divided as to whether it would improve or have no impact on one’s ability to be a team player, on one’s entrepreneurial skills or on one’s strategic thinking; and,
- Most participants were in agreement that IEC-type experience would have no impact on one’s corporate financial performance.

Below are more detailed findings related to each specific trait/competency, presented in the order outlined above.

Cultural awareness: Perhaps not surprisingly, most felt that the calibre of employee with IEC-type experience would improve significantly an individual’s cultural awareness. They explained that they thought with travel to other parts of the world, an individual becomes more understanding of different environments, experiences, and people. They reasoned that IEC-type experience would increase an individual’s awareness and sensitivity towards other cultures, and likely exposes them to a variety of new things.

“Being around other cultures really helps you accept other people.” – (Medium business, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services)

“You get exposed to different cultures and you can more easily work with and talk to people of different cultures here in Canada.” – (Small business, Hospitality, Accommodations and Food Services)

“Immersed in a place that is different from your home, you see different people and see things differently. The more different it is, the more you'll notice and understand, like ‘walking a mile in someone else's shoes’.” – (Large business, Health Care and Social Assistance)

Adaptability: This exposure to new experiences, people and cultures lead most to believe that an employee’s adaptability would also be significantly improved by IEC-type experience. Participants suggested that international experience often forces an individual to adapt to a new culture, language, and way of life.

“Going to a different country means doing things differently. The flexibility you have to have is extremely important.” – (Small business, Wholesale)

“They are forced to adapt; they wouldn’t be able to do a good job if they didn’t.” – (Small business, Other Services)

“They’re more capable of interacting with different types of people, situations, and dealing with issues that arise. They’ve already had to adapt.” – (Small business, Hospitality, Accommodations and Food Services)

Language proficiency: Employers felt that proficiency in another language would definitely increase the calibre of employee. However, worth noting, some employers did feel that a candidate still needed to have a good command of the predominant language, whether English or French in their organization, and mentioned that they had perceived some communications challenges around comprehension, understanding and delivery in the past.

“It’s a big plus. Our publisher is in France. Someone with international experience might be able to speak another language.” – (Small business, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services)

“Sometimes it’s a barrier if English is their second language; it wouldn’t be a negative, but it means they could have a hard time understanding and nomenclature can get lost.” – (Small business, Health Care and Social Assistance)

Learning/Capacity to learn: While some felt that the capacity to learn could relate to the individual, most felt that having the ability to go through this process and to expose themselves to new and different challenges signalled an individual that may have a higher capacity to learn.

“Having to learn a new language trains your brain.” – (Large business, Real Estate, Rentals and Leasing)

“You have to be able to learn and be somewhat of a chameleon.” – (Small business, Finance and Insurance)

“You’re forced into a new environment and that forces you to learn.” – (Large business, Utilities)

Being a team player: Participants held varied views as to whether or not being a team player would be impacted by international experience. Many felt that IEC-type experiences would force people out of their comfort zones and to assimilate or get along in different social settings (such as work environments) especially as they do not know anyone else. Others felt that one’s ability to be a team player was based solely on their personality and not on their experiences.

“When someone has an idea you don’t approve of, you have to go with it. If you’ve spent time working in other places you realize you have to be the one who fits in and not just say ‘that’s not how we do it here’.” – (Medium business, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services)

“These are people who have gone elsewhere, outside their comfort zones and who have to work to integrate and develop their networks etc. They necessarily have to get involved and work with others.” (Medium business, Construction)

“This can be learned. An individual is meant to sort it out for themselves once they are on a team. I don’t think international employees would come in with any better or worse skills in this regard.” – (Small business, Construction)

Strategic thinking: As with some other competencies, most tended to think international experience had little bearing on whether or not a candidate was able to think strategically. That said, of those who did feel that this increased the calibre of employee, they argued that having to adapt and learn would force someone to think strategically.

“Getting outside of your norm makes you have to think about things differently.” – (Small business, Wholesale)

“I think strategic thinking is based on the individual, but strategic thinking is definitely something we want to see more of.” – (Small business, Construction)

Work ethic: Over half of participants felt that work ethic was improved among candidates with international experience. This, too, spoke to the sense participants had about the determination and work one must apply in order to take advantage of this type of opportunity. Participants reasoned that if an individual could move abroad temporarily to work (and or volunteer and study), they must have a certain level of work ethic.

“I expect if you are going abroad and working while away, you probably have a good work ethic. It’s not like a vacation, you probably know you have to work.”- (Small business, Hospitality, Accommodations and Food Services)

“People coming from abroad have very good work ethic, hard work and dedication, it really depends on what area of the world their experience is from, but it likely puts them at an advantage.” – (Small business, Construction)

Entrepreneurial skills: Opinions were mixed as to the impact of international experience on one’s entrepreneurial skills. Half felt that it would be increased as individuals with international experience would have to come up with smarter ideas, believe in themselves, and be independent. Whereas the other half felt that there would be no impact as entrepreneurial skills are often tied to the individual rather than their experiences.

“Ability to come up with smarter, more ingenious ideas is much higher with individuals who have foreign experience. We really value this.” – (Small business, Other Services)

“If they were able to go somewhere else and live and work somewhere else then they have than drive to get things done, create work and create their own lifestyle.” – (Small business, Retail)

Corporate financial performance: This competency was not seen being improved by an employee’s international experience.

“It comes down to their experience. If their experience in another country has been with finance then sure, but if not, then there is no difference.” – (Medium business, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation)

When asked whether there were any other traits/competencies that they felt had not been mentioned but would be affected by one’s international experience, participants volunteered: understanding, communication skills, creativity, humility, humour, professionalism, inclusion, independence, confidence, leadership skills, social responsibility, and attentiveness.

Finally, it is worth noting, that of the few participants who had hiring IEC-type employees, most were hard-pressed to identify any real challenges. The only concern that was raised by one participant, and it was more in passing, was the temporariness of IEC-type experience.

Overall, regardless of experience, employers and hiring managers found IEC-type experience to be valuable. Those with experience hiring employees with IEC-type experience stated that the experience gives employees: new experiences; gets them out of comfort zone; offers a sense of companionship and comradery; and, exposure to new cultures. Those without experience hiring employees with IEC-type experience assumed that the experience would give employees: a deeper appreciation and understanding of new cultures; exposure to new industries; the ability to try out different roles and develop new skills; cultural awareness; a confidence boost; and, first-hand experience.

Recognition of and Value Associated with International Experience

Employers were then asked a series of questions to understand the degree to which IEC-type experience is recognized within their organizations and the value they associate with the experience.

Employers, regardless of international experience, tended to say IEC-type experience was not something they usually looked out for and almost all were reluctant to say IEC-type experience would result in higher compensation in any initial offer, but many said it would help an applicant get noticed or short-listed, thus boosting a candidate's odds of being offered employment. A few went so far as to say that people with IEC-type experience may not get paid more at the outset, but with the skills they have developed, they may advance more rapidly in the organization and may be ultimately better equipped for leadership roles. Most said that it would set the candidates apart from others if all other aspects were identical. An exception to higher compensation was identified by some if there were a specific requirement, or if IEC-type experience gave them more experience in the field, they are applying in.

“It definitely adds value if they have this kind of experience, but we probably don't make it a factor that influences hiring or compensation.” – (Large business, Information and Cultural Industries)

“Definitely not paid more, but it does make a person more experienced or get them further in an interview.” – (Medium business, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services)

“Not a higher pay unless perhaps they really have an experience advantage.” – (Small business, Retail)

“It certainly impacts whether I hire someone. However, everyone starts off at the same wage. I would say I compensate them on the basis of their unique abilities, but this experience has translated into advancement and earning raises faster.” – (Small business, Hospitality, Accommodations and Food Services)

There were, however, a very small number of participants (perhaps two or three) who indicated they value youth coming to Canada under these kinds of arrangements. Typically, this was for seasonal employment in the hospitality service industry. Besides fulfilling a need, these employers indicated some unique advantages of hiring these foreign youth including their work ethic, customer-relationship skills, and ability to help recruit more foreign employees like them. One pointed out that if a Canadian had gone abroad to gain IEC-type experience (in the hospitality industry of another country), they would be particularly interested in employing that individual and letting them know there may be a more career-oriented – rather than seasonal – position for them if they were willing to consider the field.

The other value that employers felt international experience brought or could bring was expansion of a firm's network particularly as it relates to language and the ability to connect with different communities. Some went so far as to say it helped their business.

“She brought us experience from different parts of the world. I noticed It's a particularly good experience for team building.” – (Small business, Other Services)

“An advantage – for language we deal with so many different types of people. Anyone who can speak a foreign language is a benefit.” (Medium business, Administrative Support, Waste Management and Remediation Services)

“Significant advantage, because our customer base is changing due to immigration, we have to reflect the customers we have. This gives us a competitive advantage, we can't have employees who have only ever lived in one place, we need people who can speak different languages etc.” (Large business, Administrative Support, Waste Management and Remediation Services)

Awareness and Understanding of International Work Programs

Participants were then asked a series of questions related to their awareness of and impressions of international work programs.

In terms of awareness and understanding of international work programs the majority had not heard of any programs before. Of the handful who claimed to be aware of at least one such program, the programs they cited demonstrated they were not always necessarily thinking of relevant programs. Responses included: those looking to hire English teachers in China; temporary foreign workers program; student programs; Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA); British Columbia Provincial Nominee Program (BCPNP); COSTI; Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP); Federal Skilled Trades Program (FSTP); Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program (AIPP); a Jamaican liaison program; and, a German Canadian exchange program.

Views of the mentioned programs were generally positive, though not very many participants had measurable or first-hand experience, but rather had heard of these programs through word of mouth.

Regardless of whether they had heard of international work programs, most participants were generally interested in learning more about them. When asked why they had not considered such programs, the barriers identified were primarily that they already had a healthy pool of candidates when posting a position, or that information about the programs was not readily available or circulated broadly.

“Absolutely I would love to know more. I think the barrier is that our platform is always on fire. We haven't made it a priority because we have a reasonable flow of employees.” – (Large business, Administration Support, Waste Management and Remediation Services)

“I absolutely am interested. I looked and looked but didn't find anything. I basically came up against a brick wall, so I created our own path using job sites.” – (Small business, Construction)

“I would be interested. It would make our hiring pool deeper which is especially needed in [CITY]. A barrier would be time for me. I am a one person show unfortunately.” – (Small business, Health Care and Social Assistance)

“Yes, to be able to have more information and better understand it, would be a great. We have a comprehensive website and we will use job sites, so a barrier would be how to get our brand out there for these people to find.” – (Large business, Construction)

As for where participants would likely go to seek out this information, many indicated they would like search Google or consult a government website.

Provided with a brief description about International Experience Canada (IEC), not a single participant had a clear understanding or idea of the program, although a small handful believed it rang a bell or claimed to have heard about it before.

Overall reactions to IEC ranged from mildly positive to quite enthusiastic support, although it was often not in the context of their employment decisions. Rather, they felt it would greatly benefit Canadian youth, with some noting the name of the program, often to tell youth they know (including their own children) to look into it. Many advocated for the importance of travel and how beneficial it can be in terms of developing soft skills, as well as an individual’s independence and perspective on the world.

“I am a big advocate for travelling. It opens you up to the world. No matter what field you are working in, there is always some correlation. It puts your life in perspective, gives you knowledge, appreciation, and experience.” – (Small business, Construction)

“If I see a resume of a person who has worked in multiple places, I know they can handle a lot of different challenges that come their way.” – (Small business, Construction)

“Developing new skill sets they can use later in life and cultural learnings, which you can’t learn from a textbook.” – (Small business, Finance and Insurance)

“I think it looks great on your resume, and it is very valuable. It definitely stands out more for me for sure.” – (Large business, Construction)

When asked if knowing about this program would make employers and hiring managers more likely, less likely or no more likely to hire employees with IEC-type experience, most indicated it would make them more likely. While a number also indicated it would make them no more or less likely to hire employees with international experience, no one indicated it would make them less likely.

Exhibit 5: Does knowing that this program, and other programs like it exist, make you more likely, less likely or no more or less likely to consider hiring employees with international experience?

	Participants
Much more likely	35
No more or less likely	23
Less likely	0
DK/NR	2

For those who indicated knowing about this program would make them more likely to hire employees with international experience, they clarified that their likelihood would be dependent on a number of factors including: logistics, costs, and the requirements/processes of the program. Those who indicated it would make them no more or less likely to hire international employees, explained this was because they either felt they already had a large pool of candidates to choose from, or that international experience was not an important differentiator in their field.

Communications Needs

The conversations wrapped up with questions about their communications needs and preferred communications channels.

There was a lot of interest in learning more about the IEC program and other programs like it, not just for their business, but also for many their own personal interest. The key areas of information that were identified included:

- Where to find information about the program;
- Overall process;
- Associated costs or grants;
- Timelines;
- Program benefits and risks;
- Qualifications, education, and experience of candidates;
- Required background and security screening checks; and,
- Case studies or testimonials from both alumni and employers who have used the program.

“I would like to know the details of the program, the vetting process, how they decide who gets to do the process, testimonials and case studies from people who have done the program. I would try to see if I could get a hold of someone who has done the program and talk with them candidly. I would also like to know if there are any benefits to my company if I hire one of these people (i.e., are there any tax breaks etc.)?” – (Medium business, Health Care and Social Assistance)

“I would like to know more about which fields they go into and more about what exactly they are studying [ABOUT HIRING CANADIANS WHO HAVE GONE ABROAD] and how it is applicable here. European experience would be great but depends where in Europe.” – (Small business, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services)

“More awareness and information – outreach from the government agencies. What the candidates bring to the table, what the advantages are when people go abroad, what value they bring back.” – (Medium business, Hospitality, Accommodations and Food Services)

“Great to be painted a picture of what kinds of candidates, what these programs look like in practice. The basics of how it all works, and a real narrative. Newsletter would be nice or even mail.” – (Small business, Information and Cultural Industries)

“Yes definitely, I would want to know about costs, do I have to provide housing, is there a minimum pay, time frames on how long they can stay etc.” – (Small business, Retail)

“Which countries, how long would the process be start to finish, what background checks are conducted, paperwork information.” – (Small business, Construction)

When asked how they would prefer to receive information about the program, responses suggested that a multi-pronged outreach would be most effective. Some indicated they would prefer email communications though there was a surprising number of people who still wanted to receive this type of information in paper form in the mail. Some also inquired about whether there was a specific website to which they could refer instead of being contacted directly, at least initially.

Conclusions

In summary, many employers indicated assuming that youth who gain experience working internationally while traveling benefit from the experience in a number of ways that they (the employers) value. Indeed, the expectation was often that the benefits directly relate to many of the hiring criteria employers use to choose from among equally qualified candidates. These criteria are traits such as adaptability, an ability to solve problems and soft skills relating to working with others and dealing with different personalities, cultures, ways of doing things, or points of view.

However, almost all employers indicated having no experience hiring individuals who had worked while traveling as a youth. Many did have experience hiring people with international work experience, but in almost all cases it was not the type of experience that relates to experience gained by participating in the IEC. Without clarifying during questioning, there was much assumption that the experience in question was more like temporary foreign worker (TFW) experience or something similar.

Upon clarifying the specific type of experience in question, the expectation that the experience would not even be brought to a prospective employers' attention demonstrated that there was something of value that candidates may be inadvertently leaving off their resumes, perhaps on the assumption that since the experience was not related to the specific job being sought by the employer, it should not be highlighted.

As a result, there appear to be two communications initiatives that might help both employers and IEC alumni fully leverage a valuable experience. For the alumni, employers clearly indicated that even if the work was not directly relevant to the position they are actively seeking, candidates who gained IEC-type experience may have some advantages over other candidates, if positioned appropriately. For employers, the program was largely unknown and while for most it was not likely realistic that they would hire a youth who was traveling, knowing how to find people who had been through the program or gained IEC-type experience was often of interest. There were certainly some employers who do think they may be able to offer positions to people traveling and working in Canada, but other than the few who already do so, they indicated having no idea how to make their company known to prospective hires or how to connect with candidates themselves. Introducing employers to the program can only help improve the possibility of the experience ultimately weighing into hiring decisions, whether hiring youth traveling in Canada or hiring Canadian alumni of the IEC.

Basically, raising the profile of the program, encouraging alumni to ensure the experience was included on their resumes, and improving the ability for employers to know or contact alumni may be the kinds of efforts that could help ensure the experience was leveraged optimally and to the mutual benefit of employers and alumni. Many employers indicated that, if brought to their attention as evidence of a self-driven, character-building, initiative, it would be compelling evidence of the long-term promise of the individual that could certainly improve the chances of being offered employment, assuming they adequately met all other qualifications.

Recommendations for further research

Upon completion of this qualitative exercise, there are a number of information gaps that IRCC may wish to fill with subsequent quantitative research. However, the recommendation on what gaps or information objectives should be prioritized will depend upon what IRCC's strategic objectives are.

Having now spoken with 60 employers on this topic, it is clear that any quantitative undertaking would have to be very careful in the descriptions of the type of experience that is pertinent to the study.

A quantitative study among Canadian employers can also more accurately identify the sectors, types of operations, or company sizes that are more likely to find this type of international experience of value in choosing one candidate over another. This type of profiling can help IRCC more effectively target communications on the program and the value of seeing it referenced on a candidate's resume.

If IRCC values hearing how Canadian employers have benefitted from hiring foreign youth working in Canada as part of this bilateral exchange program, the limited data that this qualitative study provides suggests that targeting a sample of the tourism and hospitality sector and perhaps some sectors that do more seasonal hiring would appear to be more likely to produce a sample enabling sufficient analysis of this apparently small segment of Canadian employers.

If IRCC is interested in learning awareness and perceptions of the program among Canadians, a survey focused on youth and influencers of youth (i.e., parents, guidance counsellors, career counsellors, etc.) can help establish the baseline level of awareness and perceptions, as well as the long-term behaviours or expected long-term behaviours in terms of promoting one's youthful international experience when competing for positions available from prospective employers. While gathering the basic metrics on awareness and perceptions, IRCC could use such a survey to measure the level of interest in participating or recommending and examine what kind of messaging can help grow interest, possibly including testing messages relating to employer impressions identified in this study.

Ideally, a sample of alumni would provide exceptional insight on these points, but as we understand it, such a sample may not be feasible. However, if data from such a sample could be gathered, learning how alumni feel about their experiences, how they value the experience, whether they recommend it to others, whether or how they have leveraged it for success, and how they positioned the experience when competing for employment opportunities over the years since their experience could provide IRCC with some valuable information both on the program itself and for developing communications designed to promote the program. Given how difficult it might be to find alumni, it may be more feasible to gather alumni opinions in a qualitative exercise.

Any of these approaches would be valuable for developing marketing and communications strategies relating to the IEC. Should IRCC feel there are more valuable information objectives, there are may be other research approaches that would be more valuable and advisable.

Appendix 1 – Qualitative instruments

English and French qualitative instruments are provided under separate cover.