



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

2023 International Experience Canada (IEC) Study

Executive summary

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a quantitative online survey and a qualitative bulletin board conducted by Environics Research on behalf of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The quantitative survey was conducted with 2,560 Canadian youth, and the online focus groups were conducted with 120 Canadian youth in March 2023.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre: **Étude sur l'expérience internationale Canada (EIC) 2023 - Résumé du rapport**

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Executive summary

Background and objectives

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) manages International Experience Canada (IEC), a program that enables young Canadians to work and travel abroad. Through the program, IEC provides Canadian citizens aged 18-35 with a path to work permit or visa, giving them opportunities to work and explore one of over 30 partner countries and territories. As a reciprocal program, IEC also enables international youth citizens to work and explore Canada. The age limit and types of work permits available depend on the youth mobility arrangement negotiated with each partner country. The program includes options for Open Work Permits (i.e., Working Holiday) which do not require a job offer, as well as Employer-Specific permits that are tied to a valid job offer.

IEC aims to maximize reciprocity between international youth participation and Canadian youth participation. As a result, a primary objective of this research is to provide insights and build on past research to help IEC increase Canadian youth participation in the program.

The 2022-23 International Experience Canada (IEC) Study was designed to gather information about both IEC participants and non-participants (including communities of interest such as indigenous youth and 2SLGBTQI+ youth), to inform policy development and communications, including development of new and targeted promotion and communication products, and identify barriers that IEC could address. This involves evaluating knowledge of the IEC program among its target audiences. More specifically, the objectives of the research include measuring:

- Awareness of IEC and interest in travelling abroad;
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attitudes and travel intentions;
- Attitudes toward working and travelling abroad (including work-integrated learning);
- Attitudes toward safety while travelling abroad and trust in foreign governments;
- Gaps in resources and services (including in work abroad services) for communities of interest;
- Attitudes, barriers and information gaps specific to identified communities of interest, past IEC participants and youth in general;
- Whether work experiences abroad result in improved cultural awareness by youth (versus those who do not undertake such experiences);
- Where youth obtain information about international travel destinations;
- Motivations and barriers to participating in international work abroad experiences, such as those facilitated by the IEC program perceived benefits of travel or work abroad experience;
- Experiences and attitudes in target communities of interest including 2SLGBTQI+ youth, Indigenous youth, youth women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), and youth with mobility/hearing impairments; and
- Identifying the most desirable travel destinations among Canadian youth

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to meet the research objectives. The quantitative phase consisted of an online survey with Canadian youth, aged 16 to 35. The qualitative phase consisted of online focus groups. Both phases of research included particular communities of interest: secondary school students, 2SLGBTQI+ youth, transgender youth, and economically disadvantaged youth.

1. A **quantitative online survey** conducted February 15 to March 5, 2023, with 2,560 Canadian youth aged 16-35. Respondents were recruited from an online panel and respondents under 18 years of age needed parental consent before completing the survey. The survey was approximately 10 minutes in length and explored behaviours and attitudes toward international travel, perceived benefits and barriers of an international experience, awareness and perceptions of the IEC program and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel attitudes.
2. 16 **online focus groups** were conducted with Canadian youth. Groups consisted of 6-8 participants each, for a total of ~120 participants. The qualitative research participants were recruited via telephone and e-mail by Trend Research, through organizations serving Indigenous youth, and through IEC partner organizations.

A more detailed methodology is presented in Appendix A of this report.

Statement of limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held, as measured in a quantitative survey. The results of the qualitative research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable to the population.

Since online panel surveys are not random probability samples, no formal estimates of sampling error can be calculated. Although not employing a random probability sample, online surveys can be used for general population surveys provided they are well designed and employ a large, well-maintained panel.

Contract value

The contract value was \$199,405.45 (HST included).

Key findings

Qualitative phase

Youth in the focus groups were generally enthusiastic about discussing their past travel experiences. Most had taken at least one international trip in the past five years; and nearly all had a current passport. The United States, Europe, Asia, and Australia were common destinations. In terms of motivations and benefits of travelling, discovery and exploration were top of mind, especially among the most avid travellers. For many, travelling was an opportunity to see something new and experience other places and ways of being, but it was also a time for self-discovery and introspection.

Some past travellers had slightly negative experiences during their trips. They often remarked on the expense of travelling, and several had encountered inconveniences related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but overall, their international trips were viewed as highly positive and formative experiences. These sentiments about travel in general were echoed by IEC participants when discussing their experiences with the program.

A small minority of focus group participants had no recent international travel experience. Often, this was a matter of low interest or other life priorities, but some had encountered other barriers preventing them from travelling outside of Canada, including cost, responsibilities at home, fear or discomfort around travelling, and pandemic-related concerns. Of note, health care and medical support were of high concern among youth with impairments and Indigenous youth.

Looking ahead to future travel, most youth in the focus groups had some plans or aspirations to travel abroad, naming a wide range of possible destinations and activities. In general, youth were universally motivated to travel in search of new and different experiences, self-fulfilment, and simply to get away. Among Indigenous youth, interest in connecting with Indigenous cultures in other parts of the world was also an important motivator for future travel intentions.

While chosen destinations and activities were usually a matter of personal preference, the factors that would deter youth from travelling to certain areas were consistent between groups. Youth often indicated that they would avoid countries where there was active conflict or concerns around human rights, and several also mentioned that adverse climate conditions might be a deterrent. Some barriers were more specific among particular demographics; women in all groups and those in the 2SLGBTQI+ youth groups were more concerned about personal safety, while Indigenous youth and those living with impairments had higher degrees of concern about the availability of health care in other countries. Indigenous youth also discussed how the legacy of colonialism in some countries would be a deterrent to them.

Though leisure travel was appealing to most youth in the focus groups, few view spending more than a month outside of Canada as a realistic option. Many youth seemed hesitant about working or studying abroad for longer time periods due to other priorities and attachments at home in Canada. Among the few participants who expressed an interest in living abroad, this was often motivated by an interest in pursuing career opportunities outside of Canada, a desire for a deeper cultural immersion in another country, or personal reasons like living with a partner. These motivations were mirrored by the IEC participants group when discussing their reasons for pursuing an international experience.

Previous awareness of IEC was quite low, but viewing a definition of the IEC program and some details about the types of visas available left most group participants with a positive impression of the program, and some immediate questions about the countries involved, how the program works, and what past participants might

have to say about it. In line with the low general inclination to live abroad, very few participants said they would pursue IEC, but most said they would recommend it to others, and several wished they had known about it when they were younger.

Discussing the discrepancy between inbound and outbound IEC participants that exists in Canada, participants often suggested that Canadians might be more inhibited about international experiences due to finances and a cultural indifference to travel, while international youth are likely attracted to Canada for its jobs, high quality universities, and beautiful scenery. There was a broad consensus that while IEC could benefit from more marketing and support to boost interest, encouraging more Canadian youth to participate in IEC would ultimately require real remedies to economic hardships that lead youth to feel they simply can't afford to take time to leave Canada and pursue international opportunities. Where Indigenous youth are concerned, it is important to note that removing access barriers is critical in order to support equality of access to IEC and other programs, but it is equally important to respect where there may be reasons for not travelling that are rooted in culture and generational trauma. Another differentiating characteristic for this group was a desire to travel with other Indigenous youth, or to have the option of being closely connected to other Indigenous people while living abroad.

The focus groups concluded with feedback and discussion around strategies and specific promotional materials used by IRCC to market the IEC program to Canadian youth. Viewing a brochure with details about the program, participants broadly felt the brochure was informative, but not eye-catching, and they sometimes questioned the efficacy of this medium for appealing to youth. An Instagram video with testimonial from a real IEC participant generated mixed discussion; while the video was seen to be visually appealing, youth often found it hard to relate to the specific details of the narrator and her work as a snow sports instructor. In comparison, Indigenous youth were more positive about a similar video with an Indigenous woman narrating her own IEC experience, finding her story to be relatable and inspiring. When youth were asked to provide general advice on marketing to their age group, there was a consensus that it would be most effective to reach youth on social media, especially TikTok and Instagram. Focus group members tended to prefer authentic images from real participants, supported with clear information about IEC (how it works, who is eligible, etc.), though some felt that stock imagery was okay if used to support written information. Participants also often felt it was important to reach youth with information about IEC while they are still in high school or post-secondary, to give them time to consider the opportunity and fit it into their life plans.

Quantitative phase

Consistent with 2022, travelling internationally is common among Canadian youth aged 18 to 35; most Canadian youth (85%) travel for leisure or business, reporting at least one international trip for this reason in their lifetime. Up from last year, half (51%) travelled specifically for a work, study, or volunteer experience. Of those who have travelled for work, study, or volunteering, two-thirds (63%) say they have obtained a visa for this purpose; this has also increased since 2022. Year-over-year increases can likely be attributed to widening opportunities for international travel as pandemic restrictions lessened through 2022. International experience is most often self-arranged (39%) or arranged through school (25%).

When asked to reflect on their international experiences, young travellers once again assign the highest value on the opportunity to learn about new cultures, the adventure, and personal growth, mentioning other benefits (e.g. learning a secondary language, gaining career skills) less often. Most (65%) say they include their international experience on a resume, an increase over last year. Those who don't often cite a lack of relevance to a specific role, consistent with 2021 and 2022. Seven in ten (70%) agree they are eager to highlight their

international experience to potential employers, and six in ten (62%) believe their experience has improved their job prospects since returning to Canada.

More than one in ten (16%) Canadian youth say they have participated in the IEC program; Australia, France, Germany and the UK remain the most visited IEC partner countries, consistent with the past two years. Among IEC participants, total satisfaction (88%) and likelihood of recommending the program (89%) to family or friends is high and consistent with satisfaction results from 2021 and 2022. IEC credit a great overall experience and personal growth (39%) as the main reason for their satisfaction with the program.

As in past years, awareness of the IEC program is low; just two in ten (20%) say they know the program well or know a fair amount. Those with awareness of IEC are likely to have heard about it through family or friends (34%), directly from an IRCC source (32%), or through general internet searches (25%). This marks a shift from 2022, when internet searches ranked second overall. The desire to learn more about IEC is consistent with 2022; three in ten (29%) say they are interested in learning more. Like 2022, communicating such information would be most effectively conveyed through the internet (46%), school (27%), or by word of mouth (26%).

Interest in post-pandemic travel is high, with more than three quarters (78%) very or somewhat likely to travel for business, and four in ten (42%) likely to travel for work. Two-thirds of youth (64%) say they are comfortable travelling internationally as long as they are vaccinated, and more than half (57%) feel they are more likely to travel when possible because the restrictions made it difficult for so long.

As in 2022, language, obligations at home, and financial concerns are the most prominent barriers preventing youth from pursuing travel experiences. COVID-19 is still a notable consideration for many youth. The proportion who say there are places in the world they would no longer consider living in because of the pandemic (45%) has increased compared to 2022 (39%). The proportion who won't feel comfortable living in another country unless COVID-19 rates are approaching zero is 31 percent this year, compared to 34 percent in 2022 and 53 percent in 2021.

Likelihood of participating in a program like IEC is 39 percent, an increase compared to 30 percent in 2022. Three-English speaking countries, Australia, England, and the United States, top the list of interesting destinations for IEC or a similar experience, with Japan and France rounding out the top five. Youth most often said they would choose their destination based on its culture (24%), a simple desire to go (20%), or general interest (20%).

Political neutrality statement and contact information

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