



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

2019-20 International Experience Canada (IEC) Youth Study

Executive summary

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a quantitative online survey and a qualitative online community conducted by Environics Research on behalf of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The survey was conducted with 850 Canadian youth and the community was conducted with 115 Canadian youth in February 2020.

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Executive summary

Background and objectives

International Experience Canada (IEC) is a program managed by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada which offers Canadian citizen youth aged 18-35 the opportunity to travel and work in one of over 30 partner countries and territories. Because it is a reciprocal program, foreign youth from partner countries/territories can do the same in Canada. The age limit and types of work permits available depends on the youth mobility arrangement negotiated with each partner country. The research will be used to provide insight into the travel and work abroad behaviours of Canadian youth, as well as perceptions and attitudes towards travel and work abroad experiences among IEC's target audience.

The objective of this research is to measure awareness and knowledge of the IEC program among its target audiences and to better understand the planning, motivation and experience of those who have undertaken an international work/study/volunteer experience. More specifically, the objectives of the research include measuring:

- previous travel and or work abroad experience (where they travelled, main objective of their travel, duration, etc.)
- awareness of the IEC program
- effectiveness of incentives in motivating youth to participate (i.e. job placement in Canada, international certificate, other non-monetary incentives, etc.)
- perceived benefits of travel or work abroad experience

Insights about the attitudes and behaviours of those who have undertaken an international work/study/volunteer experience will inform policy about the program. Information about barriers, motivators and incentives to pursuing work abroad experiences will also help inform policy and target engagement and promotion to increase IEC program participation among its Canadian target audience.

Methodology

To meet the research objectives, both quantitative and qualitative research was conducted. The quantitative phase consisted of an online survey conducted with Canadian citizens aged 18-40 with previous international work/study/volunteer experience. The qualitative phase was conducted with youth from the quantitative phase and further probed their experience their international work/study/volunteer experience. Participants over the age of 35 (up to age 40) were included as the research focused on past participation in IEC.

1. A **quantitative online survey** conducted February 7 to 21, 2020, with 850 Canadian youth (recruited from an online panel) aged 18-40 who self-identify as having either previously participated in the IEC program or obtained a visa to work/study/volunteer abroad. The survey was approximately 6 minutes in length and explored past international experience, awareness of and satisfaction with the IEC program and the likelihood of future participation in the IEC program. The online survey was also used to screen panellists to serve as the source for recruiting participants to the second, qualitative phase of the research.

2. Screened during the online survey, a selection of qualified youth who had international work/study/volunteer experience were invited to participate in a two-day **qualitative online community**. The online community required input from participants on two separate days and was conducted over a window of three days, from February 19 to 21, 2020. A total of 115 youth aged 18-40 from across the country participated and each was given an honorarium of \$100. In order to get input from specific groups of interest to IRCC, youth were screened and included from each of the following groups: General population, LGBTQ2+ youth, Indigenous youth, youth women in STEM and youth with mobility/hearing impairments.

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 samples, 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 \$139,964.63 (HST included).

Key findings

Quantitative results

The IEC program – incidence, awareness and satisfaction

The incidence of youth 18-40 who have had an international experience (obtained a visa or permit to work, study or volunteer outside of Canada or participated in the IEC program) is 22%. It skews male and is higher in Ontario, Alberta and BC than the rest of the country. International experiences involving study are the most common experience for which people received a visa and while less than a third have knowingly participated in the IEC program, two thirds have some awareness of it (most commonly from friends or family or doing their own internet searches).

Among those who have participated in the IEC program, satisfaction with the experience is high: four in five (80%) say they are at least somewhat satisfied (38% are very satisfied) and very few are dissatisfied (4%). Most say they would be very (40%) or somewhat likely (44%) to recommend the IEC program to a friend or family member; very few would be unlikely to (5%). There are no differences on these measures in terms of age, gender or region. Finally, a little less than half (47%) of respondents under 35 say they are likely to participate in a program like IEC in the future.

Qualitative results

Previous International Experience

While the international experiences described by online community participants included a wide variety of destinations and durations of stay, the most salient factor for understanding their experience is their purpose for going abroad: to work, to study or to volunteer.

- **Study.** Participants who studied abroad frequently work through their academic institution by way of an exchange program or an independent course. Institutions provide purpose, structure and direction for participants and play an important role in determining the location and substance of the experience.
- **Work.** For some going to work abroad, international experiences are primarily about a targeted way of gaining professional experience. This includes recent grads looking for employment early in their career and those looking for internships, co-op placements or residencies. The destination and duration are shaped by needing to go where they can find employment in their field. For others, employment is primarily a means to fund further travel. These participants work a variety of unskilled labour jobs for short periods of time. Australia and France (especially for francophones) are common destinations in this regard.
- **Volunteering.** These youth are passionate about the initiatives they support (schools and hospitals, animals, or environmental initiatives) and have found meaningful work helping people. Their experiences tend to be much shorter than working or studying experiences, typically lasting less than 6 months but the destinations are often more varied.

Regardless of the primary reason for the experience, participants see the opportunity for travel beyond their main destination as an important objective. They positively describe experiences visiting nearby cities and countries during their experience. Other underlying goals include building a cultural understanding of their destination through integration and learning new skills.

Incentives and motivations

As a group, youth participants in international experiences hold social values that elevate the importance of having authentic cultural experiences. This includes the desire to learn local languages, explore out-of-the-way locations and to experience things the way that locals do. Participants also score high on measures of personal control, defined as “striving to organize and control the direction of one’s future, even when it feels that there are forces beyond one’s immediate control.”

When asked directly, participants tend to view incentives to participate in travel and work abroad programs as self-evident: the experience provides valuable work and/or study experience, opportunities to travel, and immersion in other cultures. They do not describe a lack of motivation to participate due to a lack of incentives (e.g. job placements, getting certifications or other non-monetary incentives). Motivation comes from the experiences of family and friends who support and encourage them and many describe the positive influence of elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools in cultivating a travel-oriented mindset (programs or experiences that expose students to such ideas are commonly mentioned).

Perceived benefits

Participants highly recommend that others consider similar experiences due to the benefits they derived from their experience. The benefits described by participants fall into 4 areas:

- **Character development.** Their international experience is often the first time participants have lived without a strong support network and takes participants out of their comfort zone. Overcoming these challenges leads to long-lasting improvements in self-confidence, ability to cope with stress and navigating difficult or uncertain social environments.
- **Cultural understanding.** Participants develop a new awareness of other cultures gained through the nuanced appreciation of local history and customs that comes from an extended stay. They also become more open to cultural differences as the result of needing to adapt to not being part of the dominant culture, often leading to a greater appreciation for the Canadian way of life.
- **Professional development.** Working internationally opens opportunities for training and for insight into global industry practices. It also develops communication skills by giving them experience in overcoming cultural barriers, becoming adaptable in complex team settings and learning foreign languages.
- **Development of social networks.** Participants develop lasting personal and professional relationships during their experience, providing them with a global network of contacts and helping to maintain the global perspective they gained during their international experience.

The decision-making journey

First considerations. Many begin considering trips abroad from a young age, even as early as elementary school. There is a connection between the primary purpose of the experience and the life stage they first seriously considered the opportunity: those volunteering are usually the youngest and those going for work tend to be at least around the age of graduating post-secondary.

At this stage, participants are excited for the opportunity to travel, but also express uncertainty about the logistics they will need work out (especially finances). Those going abroad to work are specifically concerned about finding employment and whether it is a wise career choice. Students describe concerns about undertaking lengthy program applications while maintaining their grades and can get overwhelmed. Volunteers express self-doubt and are more likely to have concerns about their personal safety.

Research. The purpose of the international experience also drives research and consideration about potential destinations. In instances where those going for work are free to choose their destination, they gravitate toward places where they can speak the language to ensure they are employable. Students are open to more destinations and usually narrow down their options by researching institutions available to them through an exchange program. Volunteers either research destinations that the organization they are working with has available or research organizations based on the destination they are looking for.

Most research is internet-based and makes use of program-specific and government sites. University websites are a good, centralized source for students and offer connections to coordinators and experienced peers. The ability to connect with an experienced contact or mentor who can advise on the process is universally seen as a major advantage. Common research topics are financial costs and budgeting, program outcomes (e.g. career prospects) and logistical details such as accommodation and transportation. Doing the necessary research tends to provide a boost in confidence about the opportunity even when some doubts linger.

The most common research pain points involve visas and tax information. Available resources on these topics are often seen as complicated and/or contradictory – there is often no straight answer available. Other specific concerns include finding job opportunities (those going for work), determining course equivalencies (study) and evaluating which organizations are legitimate and which are not (volunteers). A centralized portal of accurate, and up-to-date information, especially if tailored to their specific purpose (information for working, studying or volunteering), would be very helpful for them

Decision. Most participants make their decision easily once all the necessary research has been done, finances are arranged, and they receive positive support and feedback. In the process of making the decision, family and friends play a key role by offering advice, encouragement and support. Many of those going to work or volunteer make the decision because the time is right – they have finished school or are between jobs. The decision is more difficult when finances are not totally arranged or there are family/other obligations. Once participants have made a decision, their feelings mainly turn to excitement.

Planning the experience. Finally, participants begin to take concrete action by booking travel, living arrangements, seeking employment and getting vaccinations. In this phase, having the support of some type of organization is a major differentiator. For students applying through an exchange program or those going to work for their current employer, the process is straightforward and painless as many of the details are taken care of for them. Those without this support must arrange their own logistics, including visas.

Visa applications are singled out for being confusing and time-consuming whether aided by an organization or not and are especially difficult for those not living near embassies/consulates. Information on taxes is another pain point as it is often not clear what is required of them or how the process will work at their destination. Other concerns involve fears of social isolation and missing partners, family, and friends.

Participants provide several suggestions for resources that could improve this stage. All groups mention the value of talking to a peer or mentor who had travelled abroad as a source of informed and unbiased advice. They also indicate a need for a centralized online repository of up-to-date information, including comprehensive plain language instructions for visa applications, budget planning, application checklists and job banks.

Political neutrality statement and contact information

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