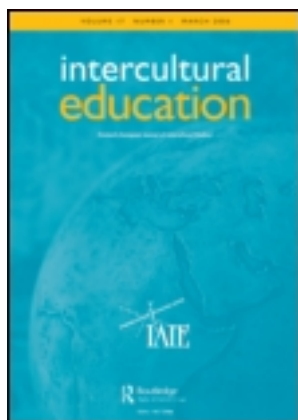


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Student perceptions of international education and study abroad: a pilot study at York University, Canada

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International student mobility has been identified as a key strategy for the internationalization of higher education. Although an institutional priority, Canada has among the lowest levels of international student mobility, with only 2% of full-time university students participating in study-abroad programs. This pilot study, conducted at a large public university in Toronto, examined the value that students place on international education, their awareness of opportunities made available by the university, their attitudes toward, perceptions of, and preferences toward study abroad, and the institutional and individual factors that influence their intent to engage in study abroad. The study found associations between students' intent to study abroad with their perceived social and institutional support and academic hassles at the host and home institution. It identified three distinct groups within the population, those intending to study abroad, those unsure about their plans, and a third group who does not seek to pursue study abroad. In terms of applied value, the findings will inform program administrators how to customize their support services and programs to both assist interested students and attract new students that otherwise would not be interested in such an experience.

Keywords: international education; study abroad; international mobility; study abroad preferences; study abroad barriers

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education is articulated by 95% of Canadian universities as a priority in their strategic planning documents, with study abroad identified as a key strategy for internationalization (Altbach and Knight 2007; The Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada [AUCC] 2006). When asked to indicate the three main reasons for promoting study abroad, most institutions identified: to develop responsible and engaged global citizens; to strengthen students' international understanding, knowledge, and perspectives on global issues, and to develop students' international cultural awareness and skills (The AUCC 2006). This is in keeping with research on internationalization which emphasizes study abroad as a learning opportunity to develop crosscultural and intercultural competencies, expand one's worldview, build global citizenship skills as well as prepare for a global workplace (see e.g. Altbach and Teichler 2001; Bond and Lemasson 1999; Dardorff 2008; Dolby 2007; Knight 2000, 2004, 2008; Taraban, Trilokekar, and Fynbo 2009; The AUCC 2006; Trilokekar and Shubert 2009; Trooboff, VanderBerg, and Rayman 2007; Zemach-Bersin 2008). Universities have embraced these benefits of study abroad.

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Student interest in study abroad has seen an increase with participation rates of Canadian full-time students going up from 1% in 2000 to over 2% in 2006. Although this growth is encouraging, Canadian participation rates remain among the lowest in terms of international student mobility (Daly and Barker 2005; The AUCC 2006). The AUCC survey identified financial costs, inflexible and heavy curriculum requirements, low awareness and commitment of faculty, students' lack of necessary language skills, noninterest and nonrecognition of benefits on the part of students, and inadequate support services as barriers to study abroad participation. It is unclear if these conclusions were drawn from research as a literature review failed to turn up such studies in the Canadian context. The few studies on this topic have been primarily conducted in the USA, Australia, and Europe. The current paper addresses this gap by exploring the factors that affect students' decisions to *study abroad*, which we define as any out-of-country experience that a student participates in for credit, as part of their academic degree program.

Literature review

Studies conducted to date overwhelmingly confirm an extraordinary and expansive student interest in international education and study abroad. A joint study conducted on a US national sample of 40,000 high school seniors indicated a very strong or fairly certain desire to study abroad (81%), an interest in seeking a work-related opportunity (72%), and an interest in second language proficiency (70%) (American Council on Education [ACE], Art and Science Group LLC, and the College Board 2008). Studies find postsecondary students have positive attitudes toward international learning (e.g. Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan 1999; Green 2005; Zimitat 2008) and recognize its benefits in terms of a broader understanding of cultures, increased awareness and openness to difference, better interpersonal skills, and becoming more competitive in the job market (ACE et al. 2008; Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan 1999; Daly and Barker 2005; Di Pietro and Page 2008; Green 2005; Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005). However, institutional commitment and student interest do not translate into high student participation rates. A number of factors that influence student decisions to study abroad have been identified.

Institutional characteristics

Student awareness is affected by institutional activity. For example, Green (2005) found that students at highly active institutions (i.e. those ranking in the top two quintiles in terms of internationalization) were more aware of study-abroad opportunities than those attending less active institutions. In addition, students at less active institutions were also ill-informed about the opportunities offered by their schools. For example, Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan (1999) found that large percentages of students incorrectly assumed that their university did not offer study-abroad programs (30%) or that foreign language skills were required to participate (41%). These misperceptions were undoubtedly compounded by the low percentage of students (20%) who spoke to an academic advisor about participating in study abroad.

Faculty involvement and course content

Student participation is influenced by faculty interest and course content. Green (2005) found that while a majority of students (66%) would like to see their faculty involved in making them more aware of international issues, in reality only a small percentage of students (15%) reported faculty that included international materials, integrated international experiences within class discussions and encouraged them to participate in international programs. Student-focus group discussions suggest that students learn about international issues in lower level core courses which are generally outside their majors. The above results suggest that while students enter university with a high level of interest and commitment to international education/study abroad, this interest is perhaps not sustained by institutional characteristics such as campus climate, faculty involvement, and nature of course offerings.

Program characteristics

Research has suggested differences in perceptions of and participation in study-abroad programs by academic program of study. Kim and Goldstein (2005) cover studies where nonparticipating students viewed study abroad as unnecessary or inappropriate for their major. Students in health and science programs, for example, view study-abroad programs less positively than arts and business students (Daly and Barker 2005; Zimitat 2008). Business students in particular tend to value study- (and work-)abroad opportunities, recognizing their importance for future employment (Toncar, Reid, and Anderson 2005).

Time and cost as inhibitors

One of the most frequently noted barriers to study-abroad participation is time (see Green 2005; Kim and Goldstein 2005). Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan (1999) indicated that many respondents (40%) believed that they did not have enough time to participate and that participation would delay their graduation (47%). This sentiment is more often expressed by nonparticipants (Green 2005; Kim and Goldstein 2005). As for cost, most students indicated either that they could not afford to study abroad (52%) or perceived it to be too costly (49%). Related to the issue of costs is the lack of information or misinformation about the availability of financial aid, with many students unaware of scholarship opportunities (45%), some concluding that they would not qualify (40%), and others skeptical of receiving funding after applying (26%; Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan 1999; Green 2005).

Preferences for study abroad

A few studies have explored student preferences regarding the length and nature of study-abroad programs. Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan's (1999) study showed that students generally favored longer programs, although a year was perceived as too long for most students. Similar results were found by the ACE et al. (2008) study, which suggested that more students (47%) prefer a semester abroad, rather than a year (18%).

Student demographic characteristics

The literature suggests that particular demographics impact study-abroad decisions. Students who are single (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan 1999), white (ACE 2008; Kim and Goldstein 2005; Norton 2008), female (Daly and Barker 2005; Di Pietro and Page 2008), come from higher socioeconomic status (Kim and Goldstein 2005) are more likely to participate in study-abroad programs than those who are not. Students with travel experience (ACE et al. 2008; Kim and Goldstein 2005) as well as those who speak a foreign language at home (Kim and Goldstein 2005) are also more likely to study abroad.

Student psychosocial characteristics

To date, there is a dearth of research examining the psychological and sociocultural factors that shape an individual's decision to study abroad. However, there is a large literature examining sojourner adjustment postdeparture.¹ This research suggests that sojourners can experience a host of issues including severe homesickness, social isolation, language barriers, and discrimination (Huxur, Nnazor, and Segawa 1996; Lee and Rice 2007; Leung and Berry 2001; Ryan and Twibell 2000; Ryff and Singer 1996; Safdar, Lay, and Struthers 2003; Swagler and Ellis 2003) which can be attenuated by psychological well-being and social support, or exacerbated by academic hassles (Hechanova-Alampay et al. 2002; Kuo and Roysircar 2006; Leung 2001; Poyrazli et al. 2004; Rasmi, Safdar, and Lewis 2010). Perhaps the anticipation of these postdeparture stressors or the perception that one does not possess the factors that can mitigate their effects, affects student decisions to study abroad. To expand our understanding of psychosocial characteristics in relation to study-abroad experiences, the present study will examine the relationship between intent to study abroad and psychological well-being, social support, and academic hassles for sojourners (Leung 2001; Lewthwaite 1996; Rasmi, Safdar, and Lewis 2010).

Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being refers to the perception that a person is meeting his or her true potential (Keyes et al. 2002) and consists of six components: (1) environmental mastery: the ability to manage one's surrounding environment by selecting and/or creating the contexts required to satisfy personal needs and values; (2) autonomy: the possession of self-determination and independence; (3) personal growth: a sense of continual development through openness to new experiences and recognizing strategies for personal improvement; (4) purpose in life: having direction, ambition, and life goals; (5) positive relations with others: enjoying warm, trusting, and satisfying relationships; and (6) self-acceptance: accepting one's positive and negative attributes and holding a positive attitude toward oneself (see Ryff and Singer 2008).

Social support

We consider three forms of social support: institutional, peer, and family; and are interested in whether members of one's social networks affect the decision to participate in study abroad.

Academic hassles

Academic hassles refer to a number of issues that youth may experience as sojourners postdeparture. These include issues such as difficulty meeting academic

deadlines, understanding course enrollment procedures, seeking an academic advising appointment, getting course credit from the home educational institution, paying fees through a foreign student account, or choosing an appropriate program of study.

The present study

The present study had two distinct aims: (1) to examine the value that students place on an international educational experience and their awareness of available opportunities and (2) their perceptions of, attitudes toward, and preferences for study-abroad opportunities and how these influenced their willingness to embark on such programs. An online survey was compiled and administered in the autumn of 2008 to first- and second-year undergraduate students at York University, Toronto, Ontario. York is the third largest comprehensive university in Canada with an undergraduate enrollment of 38,559 (York Factbook 2007–2008). We used a number of strategies to recruit participants, to increase student representativeness by targeting members of York's 10 faculties. Participants were recruited through notices posted across campus, messages distributed through faculty, department, and student organization listservs, and announcements were made in several undergraduate courses. This is a nonprobability sample that denotes both a plausible sampling of students representing the wider population from York's faculties as well as a self-selected sample as students volunteered to participate in our research (Bradley 1999).

Method

Survey instruments

Students responded to a series of closed- and open-ended questions divided into three parts: (1) demographic information; (2) student interest and awareness of international education and study abroad; and (3) measures of psychological well-being, social support, and academic hassles. All items were compiled into an online questionnaire and administered in English.

Demographic information

Participants indicated their gender, age, marital status, year of study, major, faculty, birth country (own, mother's, and father's), ethnic identity, travel, work, or study-abroad experience, and language(s) spoken.

Interest and knowledge of international education and study abroad

Participants indicated the value placed on international education both individually and by their institution, their awareness of available resources and study-abroad opportunities offered by York, their preferences for length and time of program, and their perceived motivations and barriers to studying abroad, by responding to a series of open-ended questions.

Psychological well-being

We administered Ryff's (1989) 18-item psychological well-being scale of six components to participants: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy,

environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was .75.

Social support

We administered two 11-item instruments adapted from previous research conducted by the second author to assess perceived supports at the home institution (York University) and a potential study-abroad institution (herein after referred to as 'Academic Social Support'). Example items included, 'Recreational facilities,' 'Study skills/learning support services,' 'Computer Facilities,' and 'Housing services.' Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all important* (1) to *very important* (5). Cronbach's α coefficients for the York and Study Abroad scales were .85 and .92, respectively.

We also administered Zimet et al.'s (1988) Multi-dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support to assess participant's perceived institutional (e.g. 'I have received useful supports offered by the York International Office; 'Some of my instructors have provided support in my academic progress. '), peer (e.g. 'I have friends who would help me when I want help; 'I have friends who are sensitive to my problems and difficulties'), and familial (e.g. 'I get the emotional help and support I need from my family; 'I can talk about my problems with my family.') support. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

Academic hassles

We administered a 9-item measure adapted from Kohn, Lafreniere, and Gurevich's (1990) 'Inventory of college students' recent life experiences' and Crandall, Preisler, and Aussprung's (1992) 'The undergraduate stress questionnaire.' Items reflected potential hassles experienced from time of application to commencement of studies (e.g. 'Obtaining money for tuition fees; 'Arranging for a place to live; 'Getting course credit from my home educational institution accepted'). Participants rated each item on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all a problem* (1) to *a big problem* (4). Cronbach's α coefficient for this .83.

Quantitative analyses and analytic strategies

We conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses. Missing quantitative data were replaced using maximum likelihood estimation. Data met the appropriate standards of normality and linearity. Means and standard deviations of all variables used in the current study are presented in Table 1. We conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs using a dummy-coded intent to study-abroad variable (Yes, No, and Maybe) as the independent variable. Dependent variables included Academic Social Support at York University and the Study Abroad University, Institutional Social Support, Peer Social Support, Family Social Support, and Academic Hassles. A series of paired *t*-tests were conducted between each item on the York University Social Support Scale and the Study Abroad Social Support Scale to determine the relative importance of support at both institutions. Qualitative data, such as questions pertaining to the reasons why student's considered international education important and the benefits of study abroad, were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables used in the current study.

Variable	Intent to study abroad					
	Yes		No		Unsure	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
York academic social support	4.11	.81	4.20	.64	4.16	.73
Study abroad social support	4.41	.53	4.20	.59	4.19	.64
Academic hassles	1.92	.49	2.44	.54	2.17	.51
Social support	4.05	.52	3.72	.88	4.35	.35
Institutional social support	3.87	.75	3.15	1.05	3.76	.70
Family social support	3.83	1.15	3.92	1.29	4.20	.79
Peer social support	4.25	.61	3.89	.98 ^a	4.74	.35
Openness to experience	4.13	.44	3.79	.70	4.16	.40
Psychological well-being	3.26	.23	3.34	.22	3.22	.21
Autonomy	3.88	.57	3.59	.58	3.80	.61
Environmental mastery	3.72	.72	3.72	.79	3.83	.53
Personal growth	4.57	.49	4.17	.65	4.37	.57
Positive relations with others	3.98	.82	4.00	.84	4.17	.67
Purpose in life	4.44	.54	4.13	.97	4.22	.56
Self-acceptance	4.01	.63	3.64	.77	4.09	.69

Note: While the two groups did not differ significantly from each other, this third group was significantly different from the two groups.

^aThis group was significantly different from the other two groups, which did not differ significantly from one another.

Results

Participant profile

Seventy-seven York University students in their first ($n=29$) and second year ($n=45$) participated in this project. The majority of participants were female (76%), between 18 and 20 years old (68%), single (96%), and represented 9 of York's 10 undergraduate faculties (the Schulich School of Business was not represented). The faculties with the major representation of students were arts (35%), science and engineering (17%), Glendon (York's bilingual campus, 13%), health (12%), and Atkinson liberal and professional studies (10%). Almost half of our sample (45%) consisted of first-generation Canadians with parents who had migrated from over 26 different countries (York: approximately 46.5% first generation; 45% visible minorities). Almost all participants (96%) had traveled outside of Canada, and 43% had studied and/or worked abroad, representing a well-traveled sample having visited 36 different countries. Most students (78%) spoke a language other than English. It is likely that the high frequency of second language fluency is related to the high proportion of first-generation immigrants in our sample. However, we do not have the information to know if this also includes native English speakers reporting fluency in another language. We consider our sample adequately representative of York's first- and second-year students.

Interest and knowledge of international education and study abroad

Almost all students considered it either 'very important' or 'somewhat important' (97%) for international education to be central to the mission of a university and a high percentage (87%) indicated that knowledge about international issues is

essential to university students. Participants were further asked to indicate why they perceived international issues to be important in an open response format. We clustered student responses in the following thematic categories: globalization/global citizenship (42%); broader academic perspectives (19%); personal and intellectual growth (13%); future career and study possibilities (9%); increased sensitivity toward others/multiculturalism (8%), and global awareness (5%). Furthermore, a majority of respondents indicated that they intended to study abroad, (61%). Smaller percentages were 'unsure' (22%) or did not (16%) intend to study abroad. In terms of foreign language learning, most respondents believed that it is either 'very important' or 'somewhat important' (94%), and that study abroad is a crucial element of learning a foreign language (75%).

Most students indicated that 'some' or 'a lot' (74%) of their courses incorporated international knowledge. Interestingly, this reported emphasis was not reflected in students' awareness of York's international opportunities. Indeed, although 44% of students considered themselves well-informed about York's international opportunities, 42% reported they were not. To assess students' *actual* knowledge of opportunities, we asked participants to give specific examples of programs offered. Most students (65%) were unable to provide a specific example, and 9% were unable to provide even a broad general example, suggesting that 74% of respondents could not readily identify international opportunities. Further, out of 63 exchange countries, only 20 were named, suggesting that student awareness in terms of host country possibilities is also limited. In their responses, some participants suggested that York offers more opportunities and in particular, offers language-focused study-abroad programs. York does offer a wide range of possibilities including language-focused programs, indicating a gap between available opportunities and student's level of awareness.

Further, participants identified cost (71%) and time (39%) as the primary barriers to study abroad. As for time, participants indicated that study abroad would delay their degree completion. Most students perceived study-abroad programs to be more expensive than staying at York (83%); however, 48% suggested that it would be worth the additional cost, 31% said they were unsure, and 22% did not think it was worth any additional costs. When asked to indicate the opportunities students would prefer, more than a third (34%) suggested that York offers opportunities in more countries, at more universities, spanning a wider variety of academic programs, and several types of study-abroad opportunities. York currently offers a wide diversity of programs.² Thus, this response reiterates that student awareness is low. In terms of length, many participants preferred a year (48%) or semester (31%) as opposed to shorter periods of time, such as one month (5%).

Psychological well-being

We did not find a significant relationship between students' psychological well-being and their intent to study abroad, $F(2, 74) = 2.76$, *ns*. Given the lack of significant findings, no further examinations of the relationship between intent to study abroad and the six components of psychological well-being were performed.

Social support

Students intending to study abroad ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .75$) were more likely than students not intending to study abroad ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.05$) to report a high level

of support at York, $F(2, 74)=4.11$, $p<.05$. Moreover, four institutional supports were more important at the study-abroad institution than at York: having access to computer facilities ($t(76)=-3.61$, $p<.001$), library resources ($t(76)=-2.27$, $p<.05$), campus medical services ($t(76)=-2.43$, $p<.05$), and housing services ($t(76)=-2.64$, $p<.01$). Participants who were unsure ($M=4.74$, $SD=.35$) about their intention to study abroad reported more peer support than both those who were intending ($M=4.25$, $SD=.61$) and not intending ($M=3.89$, $SD=.98$) to study abroad, $F(2, 74)=7.07$, $p<.01$. No significant differences emerged for family support between students intending, unsure, or not intending to study abroad, $F(2, 74)=.74$, *ns*.

In terms of social support, it is important to note that most participants viewed the people around them to value study abroad (66.7%), indicating the university community's, familial, and peers group recognition of international education. A chi-square test to examine the relationship between the value people around participants attached to study abroad and the intent to study abroad could not be conducted because 66.7% of the cells had an expected count that was less than 5. However, a bar chart depicting this relationship revealed a clear trend: a large majority of people surrounded by other individuals who value study abroad intend to study abroad (see Figure 2).

Academic hassles

Students not intending to study abroad ($M=1.92$, $SD=.49$) were significantly more likely than those intending to study abroad ($M=2.44$, $SD=.54$) to anticipate experiencing academic hassles as a direct result of study abroad, $F(2, 74)=6.02$, $p<.01$. Additional analyses suggest that students not intending to study abroad anticipated great difficulty in course credit approval for study-abroad courses $F(2, 74)=3.40$, $p<.05$ and were concerned with delaying their graduation as compared to students intending to study abroad. In addition, students not intending to study abroad perceived sociocultural barriers leading to further academic hassles, such as making friends, $F(2, 74)=3.17$, $p<.05$; understanding the culture and language of the host country, $F(2, 74)=7.71$, $p<.001$; and experiencing loneliness $F(2, 74)=7.00$, $p<.01$.

The perception that study abroad delays graduation is very real for students as 39% of our participants clearly expressed this view, albeit 35.1% thought that it would not, and 26% were unsure of its impact on graduation. A chi-square test to examine the relationship between perception of degree completion time and intent to study abroad could not be conducted because 33.3% of the cells had an expected count less than 5. However, a bar chart depicting this relationship revealed that a large majority of those who did not believe study abroad would delay their degree completion also intended to study abroad (see Figure 1).

Discussion

This study examined the value that students place on an international educational experience, their awareness of available opportunities, and their perceptions of, attitudes toward, and preferences for study abroad. In particular, it examined the relationship between several factors³ and student intent to study abroad. Contrary to The AUCC (2006) report, it did not identify student's non-recognition of

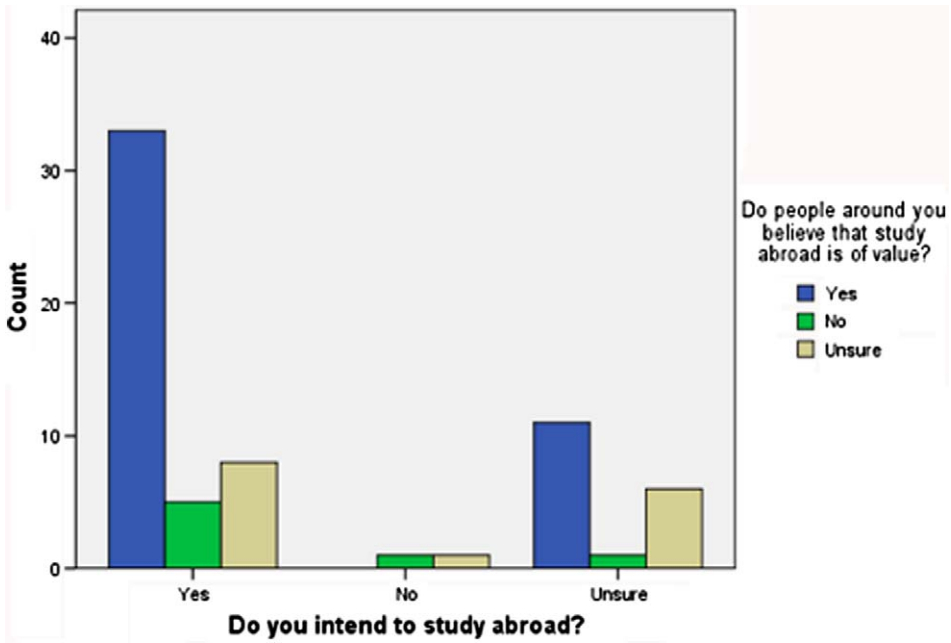


Figure 1. The relationship between intent to study abroad and perception of delay completion.

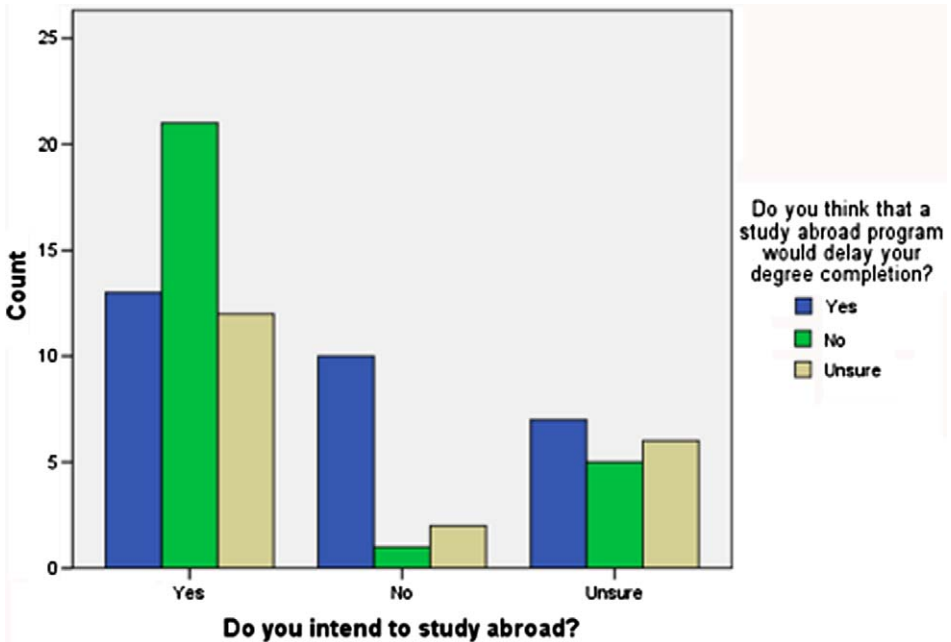


Figure 2. The relationship between intent and value people place on study abroad.

international education benefits, a lack of necessary language skills, or limited faculty teaching of international content as barriers to study-abroad participation. Instead, it established that a vast majority of students (97%) possessed positive attitudes toward international education, considered language learning an essential aspect of university education (94%) and reported that their courses contained international content (74%). They considered study abroad as an important avenue to foreign language learning (75%). A smaller, but high percentage of students (61%) indicated their intent to study abroad while at York.

Students clearly articulated the relevance of study abroad to their personal and professional lives giving rationales also offered by York; such as, developing global citizenship and intercultural skills to be employed in a global/multicultural work place. In particular, students cited some Canadian specific perspectives. They expressed an interest in Canada's role in a global community and made connections between study abroad and the competencies and skills needed to function in Canada's multicultural society (Trilokekar and Shubert 2009).⁴

The demographic profile of the participants was representative of York's diversity. Although mainly single, young and female, the ethnic mix was far more heterogeneous than identified in previous literature. As new or first-generation Canadians, students reported extensive experience with international travel, including work abroad and fluency in several international languages. The literature suggests that students who study abroad tend to have prior international experiences, including travel and foreign language fluency. Curiously, participants in this study displayed these positive characteristics, and had the added advantage of learning international content in their courses, but remained largely uninformed or ill-informed about study-abroad opportunities at York and typically did not partake in study abroad.

Green (2005) suggests that at 'internationally active' institutions, students are better informed about opportunities; clearly this was not the case at York, which is one of the more internationally engaged Canadian campuses. These findings echo those of others who report a high level of student unawareness of study-abroad opportunities, misinformation about requirements, limited knowledge of funding, and limited use of advising services. A small percentage (19%) of students made a direct link between study abroad and their particular field of study, explaining perhaps student apprehensions of delayed graduation, among other administrative hurdles, that they perceive as a barrier to study abroad. This study is limited in its analysis of the student population in demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, socioeconomic class, and faculty/academic major which have been identified by previous research studies as factors that influence study-abroad participation.

The research identified three distinct groups of students, a large majority (61%) that expressed intent to study abroad, a smaller percentage (22%) who remained unsure of their interests and a relatively low percentage (16%) who did not intend to pursue study abroad. Data analysis suggests that there are differences in the perceptions of, and attitudes toward, study abroad between these groups. In particular, it draws attention to the first group of students intending to study abroad who need further persuasion to translate their intent into a reality.

Time and cost were identified as primary inhibiting factors for study abroad. Students not intending to go were more concerned that study abroad would delay their graduation as they anticipated academic hassles in getting York to accept study-abroad credits. Their reservation toward lengthening of their program was

also likely associated with costs, as most York students stayed at home and worked while they studied; consequently reporting study abroad to be far more expensive than studying on the York campus. Figure 2 shows that students not perceiving such a delay in graduation were also those intending to study abroad.

Despite student concerns with time and cost, they indicated a preference for year and semester-long programs vs. those of shorter duration. This finding is different from previous studies that indicate that year-long programs are not popular with students. Our respondents suggested that short-term programs would not meet study-abroad objectives; to obtain the full benefits, full immersion of a semester, preferably a year is required.⁵ Additionally, half of the respondents considered study abroad as still ‘worth the extra costs.’ There was an inherent contradiction in student attitudes, perceptions, and preferences when considered alongside barriers. Universities can capitalize on students’ positive attitudes and preferences while clarifying their perceptions and apprehensions about time and cost.

York’s strength is that a large majority of students reported that their faculty included international content in their courses, thus, working closely with faculty from various disciplines in outreaching students, would prove a highly effective strategy. Messages received directly by faculty and reinforced by academic advisors provide students with an assurance about program relevance, quality, and acceptance. Figure 1 suggests that students reporting contacts with individuals who value study abroad intend to study abroad.

The three student groups: those intending to study abroad, those unsure about studying abroad, and those who do not intend to study abroad have different requirements vis-à-vis the type of information, support, and encouragement they need. Common to all would be a prerequisite to reevaluate current ‘marketing’ and outreach strategies. Study-abroad publicity (e.g. websites, posters, and brochures) encourages a kind of ‘travel tourism’ focusing on the ‘exotic’ appeal of the cultural experience while ‘selling’ the experience as a cache for better employability. Such a strategy does not seem aligned with York’s student population that is highly diverse, well traveled, foreign language proficient, and fairly sophisticated in their understanding of the value and importance of international education and study abroad.

Although the first group of students is the largest and intends to study abroad; their intent is not mirrored in actual participation rates. Students intending to study abroad indicated stronger social supports and anticipate less academic hassles. Perhaps these students are more aware or more likely to make use of the numerous social, academic, and financial support programs and services at York, and are in turn less likely to be intimidated by these systems at a foreign university. In outreach to this group of students, the approach needs to center less around the importance of study abroad (the why) and more on the range of programs available (the where); the process (how) and the supports available to make this a reality (what).

The second group of students was unsure about studying abroad. They seemed, ‘not too convinced’ of the actual merits of study abroad, especially in relation to the extra costs. They reported fewer social supports than the first group, although they appeared to have stronger peer networks. For these students, there seemed to be a need to focus on all aspects of study abroad – the why, what, where, and how. In particular, this group of students needs more reassurance of the merits and relevance of study abroad to their academic studies and encouragement to access institutional supports, both at York and abroad, to ease their anxieties about course credit transfer and on-time graduation. Since peer network support is high among

this group, strategies to utilize these networks for information dissemination, building confidence in institutional supports, and in selection and preparation for study abroad are likely to prove effective.

The third group of students is the smallest, including those that do not intend to study abroad. Within this group, there is more of a disconnect between their recognition of the value of international education, on the one hand, and their refusal to partake in study abroad on the other hand. Thus for this group of students, the association between international education, study abroad and a York degree needs to be made more apparent. This group of students associated study abroad with a lot more academic hassles and sociocultural challenges, such as difficulties understanding the language and culture of the host country as well as social difficulty (i.e. making friends and loneliness) postdeparture. They also perceived a higher level of uncertainty in terms of institutional and social support. Perhaps this group represents students who make poor use of available resources – academic, financial, and social, and hence are likely to pose the greatest challenge in terms of information outreach. Also, this group requires a more deep-seated shift in their perspective on study abroad. Strategies best aligned for this group of students should focus on building confidence in York's institutional support services, providing information on the range of opportunities (variation in types, locations, and length) that would address individual sociocultural concerns and ease perceived academic hassles.

Access to accurate, comprehensive, and applicable information on the range of opportunities and the availability of funding is central to students' awareness of and perception toward study abroad. Current outreach programs are extensive and often include new social media. Clarifying misconceptions of the barriers to pursuing study abroad can be accomplished through: (1) strengthening of meetings between former and potential study-abroad participants to discuss options, address concerns, and dispel misconceptions; (2) presentations by financial aid and registrar offices assuring students about costs and funding availability and credit transfer processes; and (3) connections with faculty members and academic advisors who could better explain study abroad in the context of specific academic disciplines along with providing detailed information on supports available at the host institution. What is perhaps most needed is better collaboration between academic and study-abroad advisors to develop and strengthen programming throughout the study-abroad process ensuring more detailed information of the infrastructure facilities at York and its partner institutions, organization of detailed pre-departure information, provision of ongoing support while at the study-abroad institution, and ongoing reentry programming that considers the students' academic, psychological, social, and cultural needs.

Conclusion

This study confirms that a majority of York's students recognize and value international education and language learning as an important component of their university education, and a high percentage express intent to study abroad, but there remains a gap between intent and reality. The AUCC (2006) study suggested that costs, curriculum restrictions, and real or perceived inadequate supports are other frequently cited barriers to study abroad. This study cannot verify, if in fact, curricular restrictions, credit transfer issues, and lengthening of the program of study are

real or perceived concerns. It does highlight that many perceived barriers for study abroad can be altered with greater program awareness and information accessibility, collaboration with academic faculty and advisors, and sensitivity to students' needs for institutional and social support. The study did not reveal psychological well-being and peer and familial support as relevant to students' intent to study abroad although it insinuates the relevance of these factors for future research.

A unique contribution of this study was to differentiate students intending to study abroad from those not intending to study abroad based on perceived social supports and academic hassles. Students intending to study abroad perceived fewer academic hassles and reported a higher level of confidence in the level of support they would receive from their home institution. Conversely, students not intending to study abroad identified several academic hassles, perceived fewer social and institutional supports at their home and host institutions, and were concerned about facing culture shock and issues of loneliness. Future follow-up focused group discussions would provide further insights into student concerns with social support and academic hassle barriers. This study identified several strengths and weaknesses in student *perception* of study abroad that universities can use as jumping-off points to customize their support services and programs to convince interested students and attract new students.

Notes

1. The term 'sojourner' refers to individuals who are temporarily residing in another country, and can refer to study-abroad participants as well as international students.
2. For example, exchange programs, summer study abroad, international internships and practicum placements of a large variety and several in cooperation with academic faculties.
3. For example, institutional characteristics; student demographic information; student interest awareness of opportunities; student psychological well-being; perceived social support at both host and home university in terms of institutional, peer and familial support; as well as perception of academic hassles.
4. The expressed interest in Canada's role in the world is broadly reflective of Canada's historic foreign policy legacy which builds Canada's image as a noncolonial middle-power that is committed to international development and peace keeping (Trilokekar and Shubert 2009). In the 1950s and the 1960s, Canada had among the highest levels of investments in relation to its gross domestic product (GDP) in overseas development assistance (ODA) and although this situation has changed considerably, this foundational feature still lingers on Canadian campuses through faculty engagement with development projects, curriculum initiatives, and volunteer nongovernmental international student organizations that sponsor work-abroad opportunities in the developing world (Bond and Lemasson 1999). As of the 1990s, Canada is considered among the top immigrant receiver countries and Toronto labeled as one of the most multicultural cities in the world, receiving 50% of the new immigrants to the country, with 47% of its population identified as visible minorities, representing 200 distinct ethnic origins, and speaking over 140 different languages. This national and local 'multiculturalism' evokes an association between the benefits of international education and study abroad and students' effective functioning within Canadian society (Trilokekar, Shubert, and Jones 2009).
5. This preference could also reflect the more common model found on most Canadian campuses that tend to favor year- and semester-long exchanges to the shorter (summer) study abroad opportunities available on several US campuses. Exchange programs enable students to earn academic credit at host institutions while paying tuition at their home institution, thus lowering costs and preventing loss of time.

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