



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

2023-24 International Experience Canada (IEC) Study

Executive summary

Prepared for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

Supplier Name: Environics Research

Contract Number: CW2334686

Contract Value: \$199,784.00 (including HST)

Award Date: 2023-10-19

Delivery Date: 2024-03-20

Registration Number: POR 072-23

For more information on this report, please contact IRCC at: ircc.commpor-ropcomm.ircc@cic.gc.ca

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

Canada

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March 2024

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Catalogue Number: Ci4-194/2024E-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN): 978-0-660-71175-1

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre *Étude sur les jeunes d'Expérience internationale Canada (EIC) 2024*.

Catalogue Number: Ci4-194/2024F-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN): 978-0-660-71176-8

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 2023-24 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;
- Changing attitudes toward travel as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- 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;
- Opinions of existing IEC promotional material and feedback about potential new materials to be used in the future.

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. Although the IEC program is only available to youth aged 18-35, it is important for IRCC to understand awareness, priorities, motivations, and barriers among youth aged 16-17 who are nearly eligible for the program. The qualitative phase consisted of online focus groups. Both phases of research included particular communities of interest: Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQI+ youth, youth with mobility, visual, or hearing impairments, and female youth in STEM fields.

Quantitative online survey: Conducted from December 4 to December 21, 2023, with 2,573 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 13 minutes in length and explored behaviours and attitudes toward international travel, perceived benefits and barriers of an international experience, and awareness and perceptions of the IEC program.

Qualitative online focus groups: 16 groups were conducted with Canadian youth aged 16-35. Groups consisted of five to nine participants each, for a total of 112 participants. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes in length and explored interest in living outside of Canada, perceived benefits and challenges of an international working holiday experience, impressions and interest of the IEC program, and perceptions of the marketing materials. 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: 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 surveys with the public provided they are well designed and employ a large, well-maintained panel.

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.

Contract value

The contract value was \$199,784.00 (including HST).

Key findings

Quantitative phase

Consistent with 2023, travelling internationally is common among Canadian youth aged 18 to 35; four in five Canadian youth (81%) have travelled for leisure or business, reporting at least one international trip for this reason in their lifetime. Under half (46%) travelled specifically for a work, study, or volunteer experience. Of those who have travelled for work, study, or volunteering, three in five (61%) say they have obtained a visa for this purpose, consistent with 2023. International experience is most often self-arranged (50%) or arranged through school (36%).

When asked to reflect on their international experiences, young travellers view the opportunity to learn about new cultures (75%), the adventure (59%), and personal growth (50%) as the key benefits, mentioning other benefits (e.g., learning a secondary language, gaining career skills) less often. Two in three (64%) say they include their international experience on their resume, consistent with last year. Those who don't most commonly cite a perceived lack of relevance to a specific role. A similar proportion (67%) agree they are eager to highlight their international experience to potential employers, and nearly three in five (57%) believe their experience has improved their job prospects since returning to Canada.

Of those who say they participated in the IEC program, France, Australia, the UK and Germany remain the most visited IEC partner countries (France moved ahead of Australia in 2023 to become the top destination). Among

IEC participants, total satisfaction (85%) and likelihood of recommending the program (83%) to family or friends are high. IEC participants credit a great overall experience and personal growth (42%) as the main reason for their satisfaction with the program.

As in past years, awareness of the IEC program is low; just one in five (19%) say they know the program well or know a fair amount. Those with awareness of IEC are most likely to have heard about it through family or friends (32%) or directly from an IRCC source (29%) – such as the IRCC website (14%), or the IRCC Facebook (10%) or Instagram (10%). One quarter also heard about it through general internet searches (24%). This is consistent with 2023 results. The desire to learn more about IEC is also consistent with 2023; nearly one in three (32%) say they are interested in learning more. Information would be most effectively conveyed through the internet (41%), while just over three in ten would like to receive information from an IRCC source directly (31%) – from the website (15%), Instagram (13%), an IEC information session (12%), or Facebook (9%). Others would prefer to receive information from an academic institution (25%) or from friends and family (22%).

Interest in future travel is high, with three quarters (76%) very or somewhat likely to travel for business/leisure, and two in five (41%) likely to travel for work. A quarter say they are likely to volunteer or study abroad (28% each). Six in ten youth (61%) say they are comfortable travelling internationally as long as they are vaccinated, and more than half (55%) agree they are more likely to travel when possible because the restrictions made it difficult for so long.

As in 2023, language, financial concerns, and obligations at home are the most prominent barriers preventing youth from pursuing travel experiences. Covid-19 is still a consideration for a third of Canadian youth.

Likelihood of participating in a program like IEC is consistent with 2023 at 40 percent. 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 (22%), or wanting to visit a beautiful place (15%).

Qualitative Phase

Most focus group participants had international travel experience in the past five years. These trips were often short vacations, but several participants had taken lengthier trips as well. Common destinations included the United States, Caribbean and South American countries, and Europe. Discovering different culture and lifestyles, experiencing nature, understanding diverse perspectives, connecting with new people, and disconnecting from day-to-day life were often named as key benefits of travelling. Barriers to travelling, such as cost, time, being away from family and friends, language barriers, cultural differences, and safety and health concerns were consistent across the groups. Most participants would shy away from countries impacted by conflicts or war. For women, 2SLGBTQI+ youth, and racialized youth, inequality and discrimination were also concerns that would steer them away from visiting other countries

Few participants were seriously interested in living outside of Canada for a longer period of time (i.e. more than a month), mainly because of other priorities in life and Canada itself being a great country to live in. Many also worried about the logistics and expenses of living abroad, and ensuring their affairs in Canada were taken care of in their absence. For those who were hesitantly interested, providing them with more details and support would increase their likelihood of living abroad.

Those who more readily saw themselves living outside of Canada were generally younger (i.e. under 24), still finishing school or in the early stages of career building, or already avid travellers. Past IEC participants were

fairly aligned with these characteristics, though a couple of them had put more established careers on hold to pursue an international experience. The benefits of living outside of Canada long-term were distinct from short-term travelling; living in another country was seen as a way to build character and gain independence, immerse in a new culture and live a different life, learn or practice portable skills, and practice a second language. In terms of the unique challenges of living abroad long-term, participants mentioned a variety of concerns, including difficulty finding a job, struggling with mental health due to culture shock and loneliness, accessing health care services, and adapting to differences in the standard of living.

Previous awareness of IEC was quite low; usually just one or two people in each group said they had heard of the program before. First impressions of the IEC program, after it was described, were quite positive; participants liked the idea of having the government's guidance to smooth out the process, and were amenable to the idea of travelling while working. However, most participants were unclear about the benefits of using IEC, as opposed to getting a visa by themselves. A handful of youth in each group said they might be interested in participating in IEC; these were generally the same participants who had previously said they were interested in living outside of Canada. For past IEC participants, the program was seen as a positive experience that they would recommend to other youth without hesitation.

Overall, interest in participating in IEC was low, usually for the same reasons they gave for not living abroad in general. For participants coming from a disadvantaged background, working abroad seemed like a luxury that was only realistic for those with financial security. Also related to cost, some were concerned about things like finding affordable housing and stable income upon their return to Canada. However, most participants would recommend the program to someone else, if it seemed to be a good fit.

Discussing potential reasons why Canadian youth are less likely to use the program than incoming international youth, most hypotheses fell into four categories: cultural norms, geographic location, benefits of living in Canada, and cost of travel. Participants frequently mentioned the work-centred culture in North America, and pointed out that there is a stigma about taking a gap year or taking time away from career and family building. Canada's size, and its distance from other places, added layers of perceived difficulty, and some youth said they felt a stronger desire to travel within Canada than to go abroad. Several participants pointed out that Canada has a high standard of living, embraces diversity, and offers great education and career opportunities that make the country attractive to international youth, and make it enticing for Canadian youth to stay home. Finally, the cost of travel for Canadians, and the risks of financial setbacks were mentioned as prominent barriers to taking part in IEC.

Brainstorming ways to encourage more Canadian youth to take advantage of IEC, participants mostly focused on suggestions about promoting the program. There was a general consensus that youth should be introduced to options like gap year programs and work abroad opportunities at a young age, so they have time to consider and plan for these experiences as they go through high school and postsecondary education. Some participants also suggested financial assistance for the program, especially for youth coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, and more support for job searching, finding accommodation, and cultural adaptation.

Discussing the specific channels for reaching youth, many participants said it would made the program more relatable if they were to hear real life stories from actual IEC participants at in-person events like school presentations or job fairs. Being present on popular social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, was also seen to be very important, and many felt that short videos would be better than static posts at grabbing attention.

Participants overall reacted positively to examples of experiential marketing, though they had some difficulty connecting with this concept as a marketing technique for IEC. Some said that they might enjoy an immersive experience that showcased the nature, culture, and daily life in partner countries, or as a way of sharing IEC participant testimonials. However, for most, the concept was too abstract to grasp. A few participants raised questions about the accessibility of immersive marketing, if IEC is trying to reach vulnerable or disadvantaged audiences.

Participants were shown a variety of marketing materials, collectively called “Look and Feel,” consisting of a graphic image from the “Write Your Own Story” campaign, a mood board of stock images, a second graphic with the heading “Travel while working,” and a mock-up of a social media page.

Reactions to the “Write Your Own Story” graphic were divided. Some participants liked the aesthetic of the graphic, and some felt that, in combination with the tag line, it conveyed endless possibilities. Others felt the campaign message was too vague, and that they would not know what the campaign was about at first glance. The character in the graphic also drew mixed commentary; some felt she looked relaxed and free-spirited, but others perceived connotations of privilege and wealth because of her appearance and her clothes.

Overall perceptions toward the mood board were positive, though participants had some suggestions about specific images. A frequent suggestion was that multiple images would work better together to convey different aspects of IEC. Many acknowledged that the images looked like stock photos, but it did not necessarily make them inauthentic. In general, images that captured people in the moment were seen as more authentic, such as the man in the red jacket taking a selfie. Images that looked staged were seen as inauthentic, such as the man holding a surfing board.

Reactions to the “Travel while working” graphic were predominantly positive and consistent from group to group, with a few critiques. Participants liked that the graphics showed a variety of characters doing different things, and felt it more strongly conveyed the idea of travel and work than the “Write your own story” image. There were mixed reactions to the style; some liked the colours and the playful appearance, but others associated it with a common corporate style and felt it lacked originality.

Reactions to the social media mock-ups were generally positive. Across groups, participants were attracted to posts that looked like they contained detailed information, such as “Musts in Switzerland,” but felt that word-only posts were too boring to grab their attention. The youth with impairment group had particular criticisms about the “Be stronger than ever” as potentially ableist.

Participants were also shown different iterations of a short video for IEC, with different music options. Overall reactions to the videos were positive. A majority of participants thought the videos were effective at grabbing attention and creating interest toward the program. A few thought the videos were too fast to understand what was going on in the first viewing, and some had difficulty relating the math teacher to the concept of a work permit. The first music option was most popular across groups, noting that its fast-pace matched the visuals the best. The second music option was least popular, because it was felt to be too slow, and some thought it had a sensual aspect that didn’t go well with IEC.

Groups were asked to quickly review two IEC websites, one specific to outgoing travel to France, and the other a more general page about the IEC program. Participants were positive about the websites, finding them to be user-friendly, easy to navigate, accessible, and informative. They also liked the clear instructions and the layout on each website. Asked about how to improve them, several participants said they would like to see an FAQ

section, and clear ways to contact IEC. Other nice-to-have elements mentioned were testimonials, costs and funding sources, and drop-down menus for the “how to get started” page.

Overall, Indigenous youth share similar views about the benefits of travelling, and the complexities involved in living abroad. Many of the issues they raised were similar to those mentioned in other groups, but were felt more acutely because issues like economic disadvantage and generational trauma tend to exacerbate barriers like the cost of travel, safety concerns, fears of racism and discrimination, and lack of medical care. Indigenous participants expressed a strong desire for personalized support to help them navigate the complexities and barriers of participation in IEC. Specific suggestions included assistance to overcome the daunting nature of the application process, more authenticity and representation in promotional materials, using social media for storytelling and sharing Indigenous perspectives, and clearer pathways for financial assistance and job support.

Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the 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.

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Supplier name: Environics Research Group

PSPC contract number: CW2334686

Original contract date: 2023-10-19

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