

Building international connections has become increasingly important to Canadian competitiveness, and graduate students engaging internationally is an important means through which this can be accomplished. Graduate student international engagement represents an important opportunity for Canada, bringing value to the researcher, their institution, and Canadian innovation. However, there are a number of persistent challenges associated with this form of engagement that keep us from fully realizing its potential. If Canada is to fully capitalize on the international activities of its graduate students, these barriers must be addressed.

The value of graduate-level international engagement

Based on a literature review and a half-day consultation with a panel of experts, we have identified a number of benefits to the student, institution and Canada. These benefits include:

Students:

- Accessing high-quality researchers, labs and equipment to advance their own research
- Building international perspectives in a globalized world
- Developing skills and global competencies to help them succeed in the global labour market
- Increasing their competitiveness for future academic awards and funding
- Being exposed to students, perspectives, and approaches from different countries around the world
- Building relationships and connections with world-leading experts and scientists from around the world
- Tapping into global networks of knowledge/expertise

Institutions:

- Bringing new skills and knowledge to labs, classrooms, and campuses
- Enhancing research quality and advancing research priorities
- Creating linkages between institutions and building their capacity
- Increasing cross-border knowledge mobilization

Canada:

- Supporting research excellence
- Attracting top talent
- Building knowledge networks

The challenges of graduate student international engagement

Our roundtable participants also identified a number of challenges to graduate student international engagement, including:

- Logistical barriers
- Financial barriers
- Absence of formal supports and opportunities
- Communications challenges
- Academic issues
- Underutilized connections with international students in Canada

Approaches to strengthening graduate student international engagement

Our study identified four key areas where we could strengthen our approaches to graduate student international engagement. These are:

- Recognizing the key role that professors play in facilitating these experiences and equipping them with the tools they need to better support these activities. Canadian universities could also do more to tap into the existing networks and knowledge of professors, so that these connections are supported by institutional infrastructure and systems.
- Leveraging the presence of international students here at home by helping them to integrate and reducing enclaves on campus.
- Improving data tracking to help us identify where supports are needed and how best to address barriers
- Mobilizing Canadian stakeholders to share their insights into what approaches to international engagement work best, allowing us to improve quality, create greater outcomes, and begin to develop consistent messaging around the value of these experiences.

Note

The research and roundtable discussion upon which this paper is based were carried out prior to the outbreak of the global pandemic. The paper does not, therefore, reflect the impact of the pandemic on international activity within the post-secondary education (PSE) sector.