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Fewer than 3% undergraduates opting to study abroad, study finds



Canadian students lag in offshore experiences even as country strives to attract more foreign students

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Elizabeth Church

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Jackie Kennedy went to university to be a teacher. What she got was an education in life on the other side of the world.

As part of her training, Ms. Kennedy and two dozen classmates went to Kenya this past winter to spend their mornings teaching math and science to primary students in a small village. Their afternoons were devoted to less cerebral pursuits – the back-breaking tasks of hauling water and helping to build a new school.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Ms. Kennedy, 22, who graduates next month with a joint degree from Wilfrid Laurier and Nipissing universities. "As a teacher, it taught me the importance of flexibility and gave me more confidence."

Ms. Kennedy's foreign study experience makes her a rare breed among Canadian undergraduates. At a time when politicians are extolling the virtues of attracting more foreign students to Canada, a new study shows our own undergraduates are homebodies.

Less than 3 per cent ventured to a foreign country as part of their studies, even though most say they are interested in global issues and are attracted to the idea of studying abroad. Money, difficulty in meeting degree requirements and lack of awareness of opportunities are all contributing to the low showing, the study finds.

"We need to see these programs as more than just a frill for an elite group," said Sheryl Bond, a professor of education at Queen's University and lead researcher on the study. "If we really believe this is important, then we need to make it as easy to study abroad as it is to study at your own campuses."

Canada's low showing comes as many countries – particularly members of the [European Union](#) and Japan – are making it easier to study abroad. In the United States, where foreign study is on par with

Canada, a bill before Congress proposes funding for one million Americans to study abroad each year.

"We really feel more Canadian students would study abroad if given the opportunity," said Jennifer Humphries, a vice-president at the Canadian Bureau for International Education, the non-profit group that commissioned the study.

John Dixon, a vice-provost at Queen's University who oversees international programs, sees several factors keeping students at home. Cost is an issue, he said, but so is language and program flexibility. Depending on the faculty, a year or a term away can add to the time and cost of completing a degree.

On the other hand, Mr. Dixon said he suspects far more students are taking part in foreign programs than are reflected in the numbers, which are a snap shot of a single year. At Queen's, which has its own campus in England, more than 10 per cent of students take part in some form of international program. And that number soars to more than 80 per cent among undergraduates in its commerce program, in part because of the design of the program, the support of faculty and growing awareness of that option.

"It's not a requirement, but a lot of students choose the program because they know they have that opportunity," he said.

Ms. Kennedy says she picked her program because it gave her a chance to teach in Africa, a part of the world she doubts she would have gone to on her own.

She expects more foreign travel is in her future, perhaps even a job abroad.

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