



École Polytechnique de Montréal: Professional expertise defines its international engagement

Strategy for North-South engagement

The École Polytechnique de Montréal (École Polytechnique) specializes in engineering and its internationalization strategy is closely tied to this sector. Graduates must satisfy rigorous requirements to be licensed by Engineers Canada, the professional entity that regulates the practice of engineering in Canada. In turn, the institution's standards influence the choice of international partners they work with, as well as the types of international experiences that are appropriate for students. The slogan for the Office of International Relations (OIR) – “a reputation that extends beyond borders” – characterizes the international work of the École Polytechnique.

The École Polytechnique has been successful in its internationalization efforts due to two main factors. First, the OIR is extremely well organized, and focuses on pursuing strong international partnerships. Second, faculty members are extremely dynamic, devoted and interested in sharing their knowledge in order to advance capacity building in Southern countries. Most importantly, the institution's administration adheres to a code of ethical responsibility in working with Southern partners in mutually beneficial partnerships.

Implementation: Internationalization is a team project

The OIR focuses on supporting its faculty. Line Dubé, director of the international relations office, states “for any partnership to be successful, faculty members must lead the content. Our office aims to support them in their efforts to internationalize the institution. They must be in the first wagon of the train, so to speak.”

The office has three organizational principles for building international partnerships:

The first is to involve as many faculty members as possible from a department to ensure a broad sense of ownership and engagement. Internationalization is seen as a team project, not a package of individual faculty members' initiatives. By ensuring departmental interest, initiatives become more sustainable and embedded in the curriculum. Agreements are approached with an institutional mindset; and are signed on behalf of the entire institution.

The second is to provide extensive administrative support in identifying and applying for funding opportunities. Faculty members tend to focus on pedagogical and research issues.

The third is to carefully assess potential partners' motives in order to ensure a solid basis for collaboration. The institution carefully monitors how partnerships progress. To protect the integrity of its reputation, the École Polytechnique reassesses any partnership where students are not advancing, or where counterparts are not sufficiently committed to having the work progress. This investment in rigorous quality control ensures that both students' and faculty's time is being well spent.

Innovative features and programs

Students have several opportunities to become engaged in international development including through the Comité International Projet Outre-Mer (CIPO). CIPO is a student-driven initiative where students participate in a three-month infrastructure project in a developing country. The École Polytechnique is seeking to formalize CIPO to bring greater structure to the program, and to directly link it to the academic credit structure. However, students' ownership of the various initiatives remains an important aspect of the program's unique learning opportunity. For example, students have travelled to Africa and Latin America to help build schools and hospitals for local communities, giving them the chance to experience full immersion in the local culture. Engineers Without Borders also offers experiences abroad for interested École Polytechnique students.



A CIPO student from the École Polytechnique helps build a nursery school in El Chaguiton, El Salvador.

*Photo: Comité International Projet Outre-Mer,
École Polytechnique de Montréal*

Lundin for Africa, the philanthropic arm of the Lundin Group of Companies, a group of Vancouver-based natural resource companies, financed a feasibility study for a training centre in Mauritania. As a result, a mining school will be opening there in October 2011. This will greatly contribute to local development and ensure a qualified pool of local personnel for Canadian mining firms operating in the country. The École Polytechnique's Richard Simon, director of the mining engineering program, led the team of experts who travelled to Mauritania in the fall of 2009. Dr. Simon spoke passionately of the project's contribution to capacity building, noting "the École des Mines will create the infrastructure needed to train Mauritians to occupy important positions within their country's mining sector – a 'Mauritanianization' of the industry."

The École Polytechnique has made other significant contributions to capacity building projects. Examples include the Al-Ahram Canadian University, a private university in Egypt linked with four Canadian universities that offers programs in engineering, business, mass communication and pharmacy. This involvement was initiated through the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) which was responsible for ensuring the effective implementation of the process.

In 2008, AUCC led a consortium of experts and Canadian universities in Botswana to help establish guidelines to create the Botswana International University of Science and Technology Project (BIUST). This project, funded by the Government of Botswana, and undertaken in partnership with private industry, is intended to establish a university with a scientific and international focus. In early 2009, AUCC invited École Polytechnique to join their project team as a content specialist. As such, École Polytechnique is responsible for developing the faculty of engineering and the faculty of technology's academic programs.

North-South partnerships will continue to be an important feature of the École Polytechnique's internationalization strategy. This institution's ethical commitment to contribute specialized knowledge to international development is a model to be emulated.