Global Skills Opportunity

Innovation Fund

Canada

Universities Canada.
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Contents

> "If Canada is to compete in an increasingly interconnected and fast-changing world, our next generation of leaders will need the experience and connections to operate internationally."
>
> Dominic Barton, global managing director, McKinsey & Company, statement in support of the report Global Education for Canadians: Equipping Young Canadians to Succeed at Home and Abroad, November 2017

1. Introduction
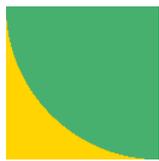
International mobility opportunities equip students with essential skills employers seek in an increasingly global marketplace: skills such as problem-solving, communication, cultural sensitivity, languages, resilience and adaptability. No longer can global work and study experiences be a privilege of the wealthy few – they are vital components of a 21st century education for a 21st century economy and society.

Canada needs more of its bright, connected citizens to gain global skills.

Recognizing this, the Government of Canada's 2019-2024 International Education Strategy "aims to diversify the education sector, boost Canada's innovation capacity, promote global ties and foster a vibrant Canadian economy."

A key component of this strategy is Canada's first national outbound student mobility program, Global Skills Opportunity (GSO). Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), and jointly administered by Universities Canada and Colleges and Institute Canada, this five-year pilot program will enable thousands of Canadian postsecondary students to participate in transformative international work and study opportunities.

One of the core priorities of GSO is supporting underrepresented students, specifically Indigenous students, low-income students and students with disabilities. These students have traditionally been faced with additional barrier to international work and study experiences. GSO also encourages more students to work and study in less-traditional destinations that are key global markets.

Initially planned for April 2020, the full program launch was postponed due to COVID-19 to the spring of 2021. During this period, Universities Canada launched a call for proposals to Canadian universities for innovative outbound student mobility projects. This upfront investment was intended to test new tools and approaches, help institutions adapt mobility programming to a COVID-19 environment, start achieving results towards the program objectives and build the foundation for the launch of the full program.

The following report outlines how, within the funding envelope of the GSO Innovation Fund, Canada's universities have been offering students virtual global experiences and diversifying their destination countries, while also improving existing and creating new outbound mobility programming to better serve underrepresented students when travel safely resumes.

2.   Global Skills Opportunity program overview

Global Skills Opportunity serves as an integral component of Canada's COVID-19 recovery strategy. The global pandemic has highlighted the interconnected nature of today's world. It has accelerated the changing nature of work and emphasized the need for skills like problem-solving, communication, digital literacy, creativity and perseverance to adapt to changes in the workplace.

At the same time, the pandemic has widened socioeconomic divides and underlined systemic challenges both in Canada and abroad. Global Skills Opportunity will build strong international networks and partnerships, equip the next generation of Canadian leaders with in-demand workplace skills and serve as a social equalizer that bridges socioeconomic divides.

2.1 Program objectives and targets

Over the 2019-2025 pilot period, the Global Skills Opportunity program will provide Canadian post-secondary students with international study/work experiences to obtain the skills and training needed to participate and succeed in a changing labour market. The program aims to address inequality and representation in outbound student mobility through inclusive policy and practices.

The pilot program's specific objectives and respective targets are outlined below:

Objectives	Program targets
1. **Widen access and equity to participation in outbound student mobility programming.**	50% of student funding to provide study/work abroad opportunities to target student groups (low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students).
2. **Diversify the destination countries where students choose to study/work abroad.**	40% of funding to prioritize activity in non-traditional countries (countries other than the U.S., U.K., France and Australia).
3. **Test innovative approaches to reduce barriers to study/work abroad.**	10% of funding to be used to support innovative approaches to reduce barriers to outbound student mobility in Canada.

2.2 Underrepresented student groups

The Global Skills Opportunity program seeks to increase the number of Canadian students who participate in international study/work abroad experiences. The federal policy for the program offers additional funding for students that identify as:

Low-income students: students who report to be in receipt of Canada Student Grants, or similar non-repayable student financial assistance offered by provinces and territories or, in the absence of receiving non-repayable student financial assistance, who can provide information to demonstrate that they require financial support to study or work abroad.

Indigenous students: students who report being an Indigenous person, that is, First Nations, Métis or Inuk (Inuit).

Students with disabilities: students who report to have a difficulty or impairment due to a long-term condition or health problem and/or experiences a limitation in their daily activities.

3. Innovation Fund

The Innovation Fund is an opportunity explore the gaps that exist within current study/work abroad opportunities and propose innovative ways to increase student participation, particularly for underrepresented students, specifically Indigenous students, low-income students, and students with disabilities. In anticipation of an eventual return to safe international travel, the Government of Canada approved more than C$3 million dollars in program funding via the Innovation Fund to support Canadian post-secondary institutions in testing different tools, supports and services to build inclusive study/work abroad opportunities, adjust programming to a COVID-19 environment, and serve as a stepping-stone for the full implementation of the program.

In October 2020, Universities Canada invited Canadian universities to submit proposals for mobility-focused innovation projects. For the purposes of the program, innovation is defined as a response to a social or environmental problem which, once adopted, results in better outcomes than existing approaches. Innovation Fund projects are intended to have a transformative impact, delivering improvements across organizations, communities, regions, or systems.

The overall objectives of the Innovation Fund are:

- Implement and test approaches to better prepare students to transition to a physical international mobility experience.
- Create new partnerships to close gaps in funding and resources for study or work abroad opportunities for students.
- Facilitate and oversee experimentation, data collection and applied research to create a stronger evidence base.
- Identify potential pathways for program development, enhancement and roll-out, with the aim to implement successful models across post-secondary institutions.
- Share information about best practices and strengthen evidence-based approaches used by Canadian post-secondary institutions.
- Leverage new sources of funding and resources to support study or work abroad opportunities.

This report summarizes the high-level findings from the Innovation Fund project reports submitted by universities.

**Overview of Innovation Fund projects at Canada's universities:**

- **61 Canadian universities** ran Innovation Fund projects (64 including consortia members).
- Universities submitted **99 proposals, 61 of which received funding**.
- Innovation Fund total expenditures: **C$1,462,861**
- Projects received, on average, **C$25,466** (including consortia members).
- Universities developed or tested **379 new tools, resources and documents** including wraparound support materials, training tools, risk management policies and COIL manuals to promote study and work abroad opportunities and improve outbound mobility programming.
- Projects were implemented from **November 2020-March 2021**.
- **100% of universities** reported that the Innovation Fund strengthened their capacity to deliver international mobility programming.

Projects by province:

Province	No. of **projects**
Alberta	5
British Columbia	6
Manitoba	2
New Brunswick	4
Newfoundland	1
Nova Scotia	3
Ontario	24
Prince Edward Island	1
Quebec	13
Saskatchewan	2
Total	**61**

Projects by areas of focus:

Area of focus	No. of Projects*
Marketing and recruitment	8
Research on reducing barriers	38
Risk management	8
Virtual mobility	19
Wraparound support	29
Total	**105**[1]

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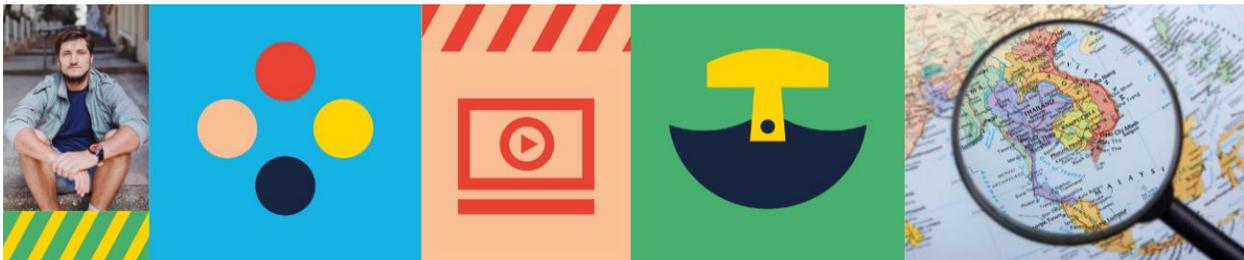
[1] Some projects focused on more than one theme.

Through the Innovation Fund, Canadian universities:

Held 227 knowledge-sharing events	Produced 207 knowledge-sharing products	Developed 175 new partnerships (53 Canadian, 122 international)

[2]

Universities reported[3]:

According to reports submitted to Universities Canada by the 61 participating universities, **Innovation Fund projects have directly benefitted 11,080 university students** including at least 1,504 low-income students, 699 Indigenous students and 2,093 students with disabilities. The outcomes of the Innovation Fund projects are also projected to indirectly benefit **147,317** students over the next three years.

4. Partnership stats at glance

Global Skills Opportunity encouraged participating universities to develop bilateral, institutional partnerships abroad and in Canada with the private sector, semi-private sector and accredited international education institutions to support their outbound mobility programs. Institutional partnerships are key to the program's overall success, as they directly assist with the delivery of the institution's GSO projects.

Universities across Canada used the Innovation Fund to strengthen existing partnerships while also exploring new partnerships, particularly in non-traditional countries. Through the Innovation Fund, 26 universities reported establishing new partnerships with other post-secondary institutions, non-governmental organizations, policy institutes and agencies, national and local governments, and private sector companies in other countries. Institutions shared that the Innovation Fund allowed them to develop and/or strengthen relationships with professors at partner universities – something that had previously been neglected as efforts concentrated on strengthening links between departments rather than individuals.

"This project gave us an opportunity to reconnect with 75 partners around the world, strengthen(ing) our relationship while collaborating on the project."
Project lead, **Concordia University of Edmonton.**

Université de Moncton's Virtual Laboratory for Language and Cultural Learning project made it possible for the university to develop activities with existing partners and engage with new Spanish-speaking partners.

"The exchanges and activities with our three university partners in Mexico and Spain were practically non-existent," shared the project lead at **Université de Moncton**. "We maintained very good relations with these partners but had difficulty developing activities and recruiting students to participate in an exchange program, in large part due to the language barrier."

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[2] Note that this data derives from the proposals submitted by funded universities.
[3] Note that a single student may be reported in more than one category. i.e. a single student could be counted as low-income, with a disability, non-binary and Indigenous.

As one of the program objectives is to prioritize opportunities in non-traditional countries, several universities took a proactive approach and surveyed students on their preferred destination countries. The results helped identify areas of partnerships based on students' interests.

"Adding new travel destinations to the existing ones was well received by students who indicated the new countries that they would like to explore," said the project lead at the **University of Lethbridge**. "The top six new destinations students suggested are: New Zealand, Iceland, Sweden, Ireland, Zambia and Ethiopia."

The Innovation Fund also served as an opportunity for universities to strengthen interdepartmental relations and partnerships on their campuses. Universities shared that the launch of their projects helped foster stronger partnerships across their campuses, which led to improved support services for students. In this light, the project lead at the **University of Waterloo** expressed that "this project represented a novel partnership between AccessAbility Services — which historically had a limited role in supporting students going on exchange — and the Student Success Office, responsible for operationalizing exchange agreements and student support."

To strengthen and develop international partnerships, **23** universities held a total of **227** knowledge-sharing sessions in the form of symposiums, conferences, interviews, and webinars through the Innovation Fund[4]. One example of innovative knowledge sharing activities was York University's virtual conference in collaboration with UNESCO:

"The conference brings together students, scholars, international mobility professionals and practitioners, policymakers, sustainability experts and other stakeholders to discuss the evolving status of international mobility in higher education in Canada and globally, critically reflect on where we are now, and to collectively build a future vision of international mobility that is inclusive, innovative and responsive to the global sustainability challenges of our times."
Project lead, **York University**

An overview of partnerships developed through the Innovation Fund:

38 partner countries [5]		
Argentina	Ecuador	New Zealand
Australia	Finland	Philippines
Austria	France	Russian Federation
Bahamas	French Polynesia	Senegal
Belgium	Germany	South Africa
Bolivia	Greenland	Spain
Brazil	Guadeloupe	Sweden
Burkina Faso	Ireland	Switzerland
Canada	Japan	Uganda
China	South Korea	United Kingdom
Colombia	Martinique	United State
Costa Rica	Mexico	Vietnam
Ivory Coast	Netherlands	

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[5] The four traditional countries (Australia, France, U.K. and U.S.) and 34 non-traditional countries.

Partnership type	No. of Canadian partnerships	No. of International partnerships	Total
National and/or local government	1	2	3
Non-governmental organization	19	2	21
Other	7	2	9
Policy institute or agency	2	0	2
Post-secondary institution	15	113	128
Private sector company	9	3	12
Total	**53**	**122**	**175**

5. Innovation Fund project themes

Though Universities Canada defined the objectives of the Innovation Fund, institutions were given freedom to focus their projects on varying priorities. Six themes emerged as patterns in the innovation projects, though many projects touched on multiple themes. Below is a high-level summary of each theme:

5.1 Barriers to participation

 A key element of the Innovation Fund is tackling barriers to participation. Participating universities were tasked with addressing inequality and representation through inclusive policy and practices that encourage the participation of low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students in outbound mobility experiences.

Projects focused on researching barriers to participation in international mobility as well as strategies to increase equity, diversity and inclusion. Through the Innovation Fund, 38 universities worked on eliminating barriers to enhance and promote international opportunities for students who otherwise would not participate in study/work abroad experiences.

Universities found it valuable to hear from students through consultations with diverse student groups, where participants had the opportunity to share feedback on the obstacles they face that deter them from participating in these mobility experiences.

These focus groups, talking circles, literature reviews and internal consultation allowed institutions to gain a better understanding of underrepresented students' realities. Among the most cited barriers identified were length of programming, ineffective recruitment, and lack of information sharing. This rich feedback and valuable insight served as the basis for the development of tailored measures to addressing those barriers to participation. These measures include:

Program duration: Most study and work abroad programs require students to be outside of Canada for a minimum of several month. Consultations revealed that many students could not leave work and/or family obligations for long periods of time. Students with permanent resident status shared similar concerns about the length of opportunities, as time spent abroad could affect their immigration status and request for citizenship.

As part of the Innovation Fund, the **University of Windsor** completed an environmental scan on effective practices at Canadian post-secondary institutions around short-term mobility, researching and identifying third-party partners to help expand the number of short-term mobility opportunities for students. The university then used the results of this research to design, develop and deliver workshops on short-term faculty-lead international mobility.

According to the University of Windsor's findings, short-term mobility opportunities offer students the same benefits as long-term experience including:

- Increasing cultural sensitivity.
- Improving student confidence.
- Heightening appreciation for other cultures.
- Increasing international functional knowledge.
- Deepening understanding of global interdependence.
- Increasing interest in working in a foreign country.
- Encouraging further study abroad and much more.

"We recognize that traditional exchange programs are popular and provide a culturally immersive experience, but not all students have the time, money or are in a program that aligns to these experiences," said the project lead at the **University of Windsor**.

Marketing and recruitment: Eight universities identified a need for more inclusive communication and marketing strategies to increase underrepresented student participation in study/work abroad programming. These universities reviewed and updated their existing communications and marketing materials and developed marketing material and recruitment strategies ta that were more representative of low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students. Universities also reported value in promoting mobility programs in different departments and offices around campus, such as Indigenous student support offices, accessibility support offices, financial aid offices and student residences.

The **University of Alberta** project lead highlighted their approach to marketing, stating "…before we launch our promotional campaign, we need to ensure that all the staff in the education abroad office have the skills and knowledge to support the students that seek our guidance… Knowing that staff will respond appropriately is foundational to enhancing our relationships."

To address concerns around barriers in its marketing strategy, the **University of Prince Edward Island** designed new promotional material that included translations in Mi'kmaq and French. They also included QR code links for easier student accessibility.

Information sharing: The Innovation Fund provided students who usually would not participate in study/work abroad experiences with a unique opportunity to learn more about outbound mobility and build intercultural skills that will better prepare them for future experiences abroad. **Ontario Tech University**'s project focused on building an international mobility online mentoring program, which was very well received by student participants:

"I have always been interested in learning about international studies, and by joining this program I have expanded my knowledge and learned more about the actual steps to participating in study/work abroad experiences. I have learned a lot about global competence and international and cultural awareness. I believe that all this valuable information will always stay with me and allow me to become a better student and a better person in general. I have also met a lot of amazing people from countries all around the world. Many of them are from countries that I've never met people from before. This was an amazing experience and a very helpful and informative opportunity."
Student, Ontario Tech University

Lessons learned from Canadian universities

Project leads share their lessons learned on barriers to participation in outbound mobility study/work abroad experiences:

- *"Many students expressed the challenges they would face in covering expenses at home while aboard and reluctance to participate in global mobility opportunities as they feared they would not be able to pay their bills on return to Canada. One student noted that "I would need a lot of guarantees like a lump sum that should cover my bills locally and internationally. I feel cost of living abroad is high, but I also have to think of my apartment bills in Canada."*

- *"One large lesson learned during the course of this project was the barrier that our fee structure presented to students. This is an area of concern that we were not aware of until discussions were had with students and staff. Once it was realized, we were able to escalate this issue to our finance department and were successful in changing the fee structure to a model that allowed more accessibility to students, specifically those students who require financial assistance and those with disabilities. This was an incredibly successful course correction that will allow for a larger group of students to have the opportunity to participate in future exchanges."*

- *"Worries about maintaining their GPA (grade point average) is a significant challenge/deterrent for students considering an academic exchange. The ability to participate in a mobility experience while taking Brock (University) courses is considered more desirable."*

- *"Thanks to this project and its significant results, we better understand students' interest (or disinterest) vis-à-vis international study experiences in light of their sociodemographic situation. We better understand the obstacles that could stop a student who wants to study abroad from taking steps to get there. These findings will be instrumental to the improvement of the delivery of student mobility programs in order to better support students wishing to have a study abroad experience."*

5.2 Wraparound services

 Universities recognize that for students to have a positive and enriching experience abroad, they must feel safe, prepared and supported at all stages of their journey. Twenty-nine universities used the Innovation Fund to develop and strengthen services, tools and resources to assist students before, during and after their study/work abroad experiences.

Many universities sought feedback on existing training, support material and tools from students who had previously participated in international mobility programming. Smaller institutions currently scaling up their outbound mobility services used this opportunity to survey and interview students on the perceived benefit of various types of pre- and post-outbound mobility support and training. Based on the feedback collected, universities developed and strengthened their tools.

Pre-departure and post-experience assessment: Twenty universities developed pre-departure and post-experience self-assessment tools and resources. These aim to prepare students for intercultural experiences prior to their departure and to ensure that they fully benefit from the rich experience they will gain from being abroad.

Pre-departure trainings offered by institutions discussed travel expectations, culture shock and adaptability strategies. Universities also developed pre-departure supports such as pre-departure checklists, handbooks, guides to cross-cultural communication, travel resources (information on passports, visas, flight booking) and country specific safety tips. Pre-departure materials were also developed specifically for underrepresented groups and the unique challenges they may encounter during their study/work abroad experiences.

The **University of Guelph** created an inclusive and interactive virtual re-entry program focusing on three modules: self-awareness, intercultural competence and employability. "While study abroad can advance intercultural competencies, students often face difficulty articulating transferrable intercultural skills and explaining to prospective employers how their international experience sets them apart," said the project lead. "This can be particularly challenging for students in underrepresented groups with unique experiences including, first-in-the-family, LGBTQ2S+, BIPOC and those with disabilities."

Universities also developed post-experience assessment tools to help students reflect on their time abroad and assess what skills, knowledge, mindsets and abilities they had gained. These self-assessments help students recognize the transformative nature of their experience abroad and identify ways they can use their acquired cross-cultural competencies and global mindset to lead meaningful change within their communities.

Intercultural training: Universities created intercultural training programs/modules to educate and sensitize students on various topics pertinent to mobility experiences. Topics included the complexity of intersectionality, understanding privilege and what it means to be an ally. These courses not only allow students to develop a global mindset, but they also prepare them for future mobility experiences.

Sixteen universities developed intercultural training to help navigate and eliminate barriers to cross-cultural communication that students may face. Staff members also received training to equip them with the knowledge and capacity to administer intercultural training and Intercultural Development Inventory assessments.

To implement and test approaches to better prepare students for physical international mobility experiences, the **University of Saskatchewan** developed Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) -based intercultural competencies modules.

"In partnership with our international student centre, we developed six intercultural communication competencies modules that can be used by any COIL or other instructor within our learning management system," said the project lead at the **University of Saskatchewan**. "This is designed as a wraparound for pre- and post-experience assessment to prepare students for intercultural experiences…Students who complete the module are better prepared to learn as much as possible in a remote context but can also be used for physical mobility experiences as they become possible."

Online outbound mobility resources: Thirteen universities used the Innovation Fund to reinforce the development of resources, search engines and content focused on study/work abroad opportunities. These tools would help attract, encourage and inspire students, particularly low-income, students with disabilities and Indigenous students to explore the outbound mobility experiences available to them on campus.

In consultation with students, universities developed rich online resources with the intention of better informing and educating students on mobility opportunities and the benefits of studying or working abroad. These resources act as a first step in addressing barriers to participation by providing students with specific and

detailed information related to areas of study as well as countries and partner universities around the world. The platforms also provide an overview of required administrative processes, as well as risk management and safety protocols about the country of destination. Through these online resources, universities are also able to share pertinent information about the host university, such as accommodation resources, list of nearby hospital/clinic, emergency contacts and much more.

Concordia University of Edmonton's international team and Centre for Innovation and Applied Research used the Innovation Fund to create a study abroad platform called Go Abroad, that will "function as a marketplace where students can shop for different study abroad opportunities and exchange experiences. The platform's purpose is to be a guide for those students who are considering mobility as it contains resources and materials as well to meaningfully connect students with peers in partner universities."

With this same spirit of innovation, **Thompson Rivers University** created an e-portfolio space that facilitates peer-to-peer and mentor connections. "The e-portfolio allows student participants to introduce themselves and describe the type of research they would like to do, while also providing a safe virtual space to engage with peers throughout the program" said the project lead. "Participants can reflect on their individual research journey and seek input from peers and faculty. The goal is to provide an alternative platform for reflection, website design, and skill and professional development leading towards future online activities during their learning journey."

These newly developed resources will help ensure that all students have the necessary information to guide their decision to participate in mobility experiences, alongside essential resources to assist them throughout their experience.

Lessons learned from Canadian universities

Project leads share their lessons learned on implementing wrap-around services and support for students particularly low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students.

- *"It is important to pilot intercultural competence training on a smaller number of participants at first, in order to be able to deploy a well-tailored training that has the expected transformational impact on the whole institution. Do not get overwhelmed by the high demand and choose to train fewer people at first in order to have a solid base and proven quality in action. This approach will avoid getting "burned out" and will allow us to gain agility and adaptation to the different audiences to come."*

- *"As expected, the first time implementing the IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) assessment took a significant amount of planning, preparation, monitoring and troubleshooting (more time than was anticipated). Understanding the set up of the IDI assessment, plan and debrief and delivering to students will be much smoother each time administered."*

- *"Mentor training and support: each team of students was supported by one to two mentors (instructors, administrative staff and doctoral students). Mentors were provided a guidebook and training workshop that outlined key expectations and output. Despite developing these measures, we learned that the mentors require more concrete parameters. Going forward we will develop a timeline with a) key deliverables for students b) check points that will monitor student engagement and team dynamics c) intervention and support strategies".*

- *"The students we met did not want a theoretical and formal training that looked like a course. They are more interested in informality, fun and discovery and that is what led us to opt more for programming than training. That said, we have learned to be careful about unsuccessful approaches and empty measures that only serve to make us look good (even if the intentions are initially good)."*

5.3 Virtual mobility

 Due to the pandemic and ensuing travel restrictions, many universities pivoted to virtual mobility, which can also be referred to as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). This form of virtual mobility is rooted in a formal curriculum that uses information and communication technologies to facilitate cross-border and/or inter-institutional academic, collaboration, and cultural and experiential exchanges. Through the successful implementation of their projects, institutions remarked that virtual mobility helps break down barriers to participation by allowing students to partake in COIL with partners across the world without incurring any travel or associated costs.

Nineteen universities implemented virtual mobility to promote intercultural learning opportunities amid the pandemic. Universities reported strong interest and participation from students on their campus despite the pandemic. In many cases, before being matched with their peers abroad, participants received training on subjects such as equity, diversity and inclusion, building intercultural awareness, intercultural competencies and networking/careers to prepare them for the experience. Participants in these virtual activities shared that they developed intercultural awareness and teamwork skills by working closely with students from different countries. Participants also reported gaining time management, media and digital literacy, language, intercultural, networking and team-building skills through these virtual experiences.

The **University of Calgary** launched its eight-week virtual program, the Global Community Challenge YYC, that created opportunities for students to work in all-virtual multinational teams to identify solutions to real-world issues. A student participant shared that "it was amazing to work with a team of international students from such diverse backgrounds to solve a problem and make a change that would be implemented in the real world. The environment was supportive, and I developed some extremely useful skills including in entrepreneurship, project management and leadership. I'm so grateful to have this opportunity and now I can add it to my resume and apply the skills in other parts of my life."

Algoma University's project focused on developing virtual exchange opportunities to provide students a with the chance to work in global teams and develop intercultural and problem-solving skills that will help them be interculturally competent. The project lead shared that, "even though these COIL courses were co-developed between three countries, there was even more diversity among students who were included in this project, which made the courses more diverse and exciting. Through this experiential cross-cultural learning experience, the participating students had an opportunity to deepen their understanding of themselves, their culture, how they are perceived by 'others' and how they perceive 'others' by engaging other cultural perspectives."

Alternatively, some universities used the Innovation Fund as an opportunity to create new infrastructure to facilitate the delivery of virtual mobility experiences to students. For example, as part of its Celtic Studies and Mediaeval Studies, the **University of St. Michael's College** created a virtual classroom to provide students access to digitized materials all while engaging faculties and librarians at their partner institution, Maynooth

University in Ireland. "The project introduced students to new technology to tap resources (both human and material) to enhance their understanding," shared the project lead. "The virtual reality session allowed them to enter a Mediaeval scriptorium, which gave them incentive to visit surviving scriptoria in Europe. The classroom, now fully operational, connects them with scholars exploring Mediaeval and Celtic documents/materials. The global classroom/studio has now become a repository of a curated collection of digital objects from Ireland and Europe that can be used by students on a regular basis."

Lessons learned from Canadian universities

Project leads share their lessons learned on implementing virtual mobility projects on their campus.

- *"Even though the COIL courses were co-developed between three countries, there was even more diversity among students who were included in this project which made the courses more diverse and exciting. Finding a suitable e-learning platform that works for both our university, our partner institutions, and the effect of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) and FIPPA (Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy) Compliance was a challenge. We hope that we can address this challenge from the start when developing future COIL courses."*

- *"There was too little time to get the studio/classroom up and running, although we were fortunate to have the studio ready for our series of "talks" with Maynooth (University) just in time for the original timing of the students travelling to Ireland. COVID may have prevented students from being in Ireland in person, but they have now had the experience virtually with an even larger array of documents, artifacts, and experts at their disposal. In order to complete our task against the clock, our Global Classroom Committee met every three weeks, research contracts were extended, and the studio was delivered by conscientious work by the Physical Plant department and IT department. I am indebted to the academics, graphic artists, IT specialists, graduate students and technical wizards who were part of our committee."*

- *"Students reported that it was a great platform to meet others from around the world and learn about each other. All students involved said they wanted the program to continue. This type of platform is a great way for students to become more prepared for an exchange. It was also a success because it was a space where students could connect internationally during a time when physical travel wasn't possible."*

5.4 Risk management

The pandemic served as an eye-opener for many institutions on the importance of developing and implementing robust risk management strategies and protocols to ensure the safety of their student participants. Eight universities used this funding to create institutional policies that formalize risk management and tolerance in compliance with legal and regulatory obligations, which will be pivotal once travel resumes. Institutions partnered with risk management specialists to support various initiatives, including:

- Reviewing existing risk management, intervention protocols and procedures.
- Analyzing and developing prevention, risk management and intervention processes and tools.
- Creating committees responsible for monitoring and evaluating mobility experiences.

- Developing training programs for students and faculty members on risk interventions and safety reflexes while abroad.

Institutions and their partner universities abroad developed and strengthened risk management and intervention tools, including standard operational procedures and protocols. These efforts will facilitate rapid and adequate emergency responses for students that find themselves in precarious situations while abroad such as natural disasters, arrest, repatriation, fire, road accident or family emergencies.

As part of its innovation project, **St. Francis Xavier University** worked on strengthening risk management policies and processes by conducting an internal review of its documents and practices. "The renovation of the StFX risk management policy and processes, and the development of resources from an institutional perspective will benefit all students who participate," said the project lead. "This project has allowed us to focus a lens on non-traditional students/travelers, allowing us to examine and understand more purposefully what their barriers may be that are different from traditional students and ensure that – or at least question if – our policies and processes fit and serve those populations more effectively."

Lessons learned from Canadian universities

Project leads share their lessons learned on implementing and/or reinforcing their risk management protocols and procedures for a safe outbound mobility experience for students.

- *"Risk management during mobility experiences is a relatively recent practice in academia. Expertise develops progressively in response to the demand of universities who are careful to ensure the safety of the members of their community as they undertake international activities. Our experience within the project encouraged us to widen the scope and spectrum of our possibilities while continuing to explore the market or to develop tailored solutions ourselves."*

- *"Accept to take a necessary step back: rather than jumping into a platform, into new pre and post activities, and adopting content provided by Aléas, to take time to survey the community as a whole and to adapt that content to our institution's culture (or to the essence of our institution). We therefore gain an understanding, buy-in and a level of adjustment that will have real impact on opening our community to mobility and on enabling the program to reach its full potential once it launches."*

- *"A risk management consultant provided a comprehensive list of processes, procedures and tools that should be in place within diligent institutions. When partner universities compared their existing processes, procedures and tools to this list, there were definite and identifiable gaps. From this, it can be concluded that we can provide better, safer and more relevant programs by collaborating and sharing information and resources."*

5.5 Indigenous outbound mobility
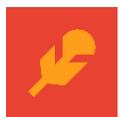
Eighteen universities' Innovation Fund projects focused on strengthening the participation of Indigenous students in international education. Through the support of local Indigenous leaders and communities, universities connected with Indigenous students to learn more about their current realities, perceived barriers and concerns related to international mobility opportunities.

Some institutions highlighted that finding Indigenous students who were open to participating in these projects was a challenge. **One university shared**:

"It was difficult to recruit Indigenous students for our discussion groups…Most of the students we contacted did not respond or did not want to share the recruitment announcement. Maybe some of the groups found our

initial approach a little too stigmatizing or victimizing when we seemed to be grouping Indigenous students in the same bucket as students with disabilities or in a precarious financial situation."

Key findings from institutions who had consultations with Indigenous students are listed below:

Lack of information and financial barriers: One of the most common barriers identified by Indigenous students was a lack of information or awareness of study/work abroad opportunities and funding options offered on their campus. This can make mobility experiences seem out of reach and inaccessible to Indigenous student groups. Recognizing the need to review recruitment strategies to increase the Indigenous student participation, universities are designing marketing materials (videos, websites, pamphlets) that cater specifically to Indigenous students and promote study/work abroad opportunities that reflect their identity and realities. Institutions also proposed the creation of tailored information sessions and collaboration with Indigenous services on campus to better promote available opportunities to Indigenous students.

To increase Indigenous students' participation, The **University of Lethbridge** created an Indigenous recruitment strategy that includes two five-minute videos of Indigenous students who had previously attended and completed the Study Abroad Program. According to the project lead "the students described their experiences of the Study Abroad Program and shared helpful insights into what was effective and what could have been done better. [The videos](#) highlight not only their trip, but memorable experiences, barriers to travelling and encouraging messages."

Community engagement: Several Indigenous students voiced that, to feel confident and comfortable participating in outbound mobility, they would like to be accompanied by an Elder and travel in small cohorts with other Indigenous students. This would also provide them with the opportunity to share ideas and lived experiences with other Indigenous groups. This feedback enlightened universities to the importance of engaging with and consulting Indigenous stakeholders such as Elders when designing mobility experiences catered to Indigenous students, and the roles they can play in supporting students while abroad.

Through its innovation project, the Indigenous Student Mobility project, **Thompson Rivers University** actively consulted and engaged with local Indigenous Elders. The university understood the importance of exploring various ways to address barriers to participation within the Indigenous community on campus in a safe and inclusive manner. "The inclusion of students, Elders and faculty enables the program participants to see themselves as part of a wider community of Indigenous scholars," said the project lead. "Elders are central to the program and students' projects…The inclusion of Elders during initial interactions make clear the space entered by the program participants is a space of tradition, respect and ceremony, ensuring participants connect the act of research to their own community/nations practices."

Duration: As with general barriers to mobility, long-term mobility experiences were found to be prohibitive to many Indigenous students with family obligations. Students shared that they would be more inclined to participate in short-term study/work abroad experiences which would limit their time away from their families and communities.

Lessons learned from Canadian universities

Project leads share their lessons learned on addressing barriers to participation, particularly for Indigenous students:

- *"The inclusion of Indigenous students into our research process was more difficult than anticipated, given the project's short timeline. For the development of the pilot program, it was agreed to address the issue of mobility very early in Indigenous students' journeys and to preferably include it in the services specialized*

for Indigenous students, in a way that presents the mobility project in a familiar framework for those students."

- *"Process complications: Many participants identified barriers in the process of engaging with outward mobility opportunities. This included challenges facing first-generation students (such as the culture shock they often experience in attending university that can make it hard to consider and be prepared for international travel if dealing with immediate needs); complicated and unclear paperwork and processes (such as applications to study abroad, course credit transfers and travel documents); lack of role models for other Indigenous students to talk to about working through challenges; and an absence of a dedicated support staff member to act as a point person with insight in Indigenous points of view and experiences."*

- *"A lesson learned was the importance of a safe space so that students could share their knowledge and experiences openly. This is particularly important in the context of this program, acknowledging that our academic learning spaces have historically silenced and continue to moderate Indigenous voices. The organizing team was guided by Indigenous principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility as pertinent to building meaningful relationships. Understanding these principles and the ongoing colonial process that affect Indigenous peoples in the academy was essential to building this safe space, so that there was a sense of equality, safety, and reciprocity throughout the program."*

- *"Indigenous communities have a deep desire to engage with other Indigenous communities on a Nation-to-Nation basis. If this is facilitated, it could lead to increased trust of government and better relations. One statement made by a student that was repeated in various ways was: 'send Indigenous students to reserves rather than take them off. I don't necessarily have time to leave it if I can learn there. I would rather meet other Indigenous groups in North America.'"*

5.6 Accessible outbound mobility

Nine universities saw the Innovation Fund as an opportunity work on increasing the participation of students with disabilities in study/work abroad programming and identify practices to better support them throughout their experience. Surveyed students provided pertinent information on their experience with outbound mobility and lived experiences as students with disabilities. Below are some of the findings from consultations with these students:

Marketing: Some students expressed that the images used to promote study/work abroad opportunities do not speak or appeal to them, as these are not reflective of their experiences as students with disabilities. Visuals used to promote outbound mobility often showcase able-bodied students participating in activities such as surfing, hiking or skydiving – activities that would not cater to their disabilities. Using this feedback, many universities adjusted their marketing materials and strategies to better represent and include students with disabilities.

Through its project that aimed to identify and reduce barriers to exchange for students with disabilities, the **University of Waterloo** learned that "meaningful representation matters, and that students want to see imagery of persons with disabilities participating in exchanges in a way that does not appear as tokenism."

Lack of information: Survey and focus group data highlighted that student with disabilities require additional information to determine whether a host school can meet their specific needs. At the recommendation of students, the **University of Waterloo** developed a survey for its exchange partners to gather information about the services and supports available to students related to health, accessibility and wellness. The university also created a resource directing students to on-campus resources that can help inform them as they consider and prepare for study/work abroad experiences.

Saint Mary's University addressed the lack of information barrier by launching its [Global Learning Ambassadors program](#). The project lead shared that, by providing peer-to-peer advice the ambassadors "shine critical light on issues around accessibility and discrimination, and help students make informed decisions about their study abroad destinations."

Access to medication: It was noted that many students with disabilities stated that they might be reluctant to participate in international mobility experiences due to their fear of not having access to prescribed medication or proper care in a host country. Students also raised concerns about the possible medical differences in responding and providing disability-based accommodations. For example, the **University of Waterloo** observed that "racialized students with disabilities noted additional concerns with crossing borders with large quantities of medication."

Lessons learned from Canadian universities

Project leads share lessons learned on addressing barriers to participation particularly for students with disabilities.

- *"Creating a survey of students with disabilities is a unique challenge, one that requires special survey design measures and student recruitment channels. We partially succeeded, however, because of the timing of the survey, we were not able to reach all the students we had hoped. A second wave of data collection in the fall of 2021 will use these lessons to engage more students with disabilities."*

- *"Finding resources and guidelines proved difficult: for example, when developing our online survey, we experienced challenges identifying the accessibility standards we should meet and locating staff to provide appropriate expertise."*

6. Additional lessons learned

 Project leads shared additional lessons learned from implementing their Innovation Fund projects to better support students, particularly low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students. Project leads also used this opportunity to express some of their challenges executing their projects during a global pandemic.

Canadian universities share other lessons learned from their Innovation Fund projects.

- *"A lesson learned was the power of student involvement in our process. The focus groups and touch points developed with past student participants, provided valuable insights to inform how we communicate and promote outbound student mobility experiences to future students."*

- *"The students exceeded expectations in the collaborative projects, especially considering that the program was entirely extra-curricular. At every workshop, students came ready to discuss and engage with the faculty and their peers. They were eager to share their experiences with their peers, relate to one another and learn from each other. They even requested an additional project, to prepare a presentation about their communities so that they could share with the other participants. This level of commitment and engagement demonstrates the importance of bringing Indigenous communities together and the intersection of global Indigeneity and internationalization efforts."*

- *"Good enough is better than perfect. When trying new ideas, you have to be willing to let go of perfect to get something out there. By launching a new program in a time of uncertainty, you get the unexpected benefit of allowing it take shape and adapt to the needs of the instructors."*

- *"We also learned that a student-centric approach might mean reprioritizing an objective in the best interests of our students. For example, despite our intentions to lead a focus group with Indigenous students last semester, it was not the right time. Indigenous students are being pulled in so many directions by our community right now, as we are eager to advance the decolonization initiatives at our institution. We must first and foremost be mindful of their time, wellbeing and academic success."*

- *"Due to the timing of the launch and announcement of funding, it meant that many senior administrators at our university were occupied with making decisions related to COVID planning and preparations and working with our provincial government and Public Health to keep our community safe. As a result, trying to pull key people together to work on this project proved very challenging and then trying to ensure that these people who were at the table to discuss and consider important items related to our students' safety and security abroad were appropriately prepared and ready to contribute was also difficult to do."*

- *"We learned how complex and sensitive working in this space is. For ourselves and other staff in our position, engagement requires a level of humility that I don't feel is necessarily innate in the type of work we do. We had to make many adjustments throughout the week that responded to what was coming up during the workshops. We had our planned schedule for how the week would go and needed to remain nimble and open to last minute changes and adjustments that were supportive of the participants in the forum."*

- *"In terms of interviewing such a broad cross-section of people from various backgrounds, there will always be unexpected complications; however, the results are well worth it. Patience is a virtue. Best be prepared to pivot as the group of people you start out with may not necessarily be the group you finish with."*

- *"Drafting the survey questionnaire was much longer and more arduous than expected. It was difficult to consider all possible logical pathways to identify all potential situations and represent the most students possible. We learned to take the necessary time for this crucial step of the project. We adjusted our timetable to give us the possibility to reflect and to take into account all the variables needed to adequately represent all students who were going to participate in the survey."*

- *"It might take time and persistence to convince not only students but faculty as well - about new initiatives like virtual mobility but most of the professors I work with are now open and interested in participating/contributing in a meaningful way. You need to bring more details to them, so they see the benefits for both parties in the long run. Now the tables have turned — a few faculty chairs are sending me info about webinars and invites for international forums regarding virtual opportunities."*

- *"We learned that there is no one-size-fits-all to participation numbers, based on project needs/international partner capacity. There is a need for flexible timelines for each partner, as academic timelines vary internationally. When programming co-curricular programs, we have been able to learn*

from one another where the shared time periods for student programming gaps exist, such as reading weeks aligning with summer breaks, etc.. We also predict that in the future student numbers built into program design will also be influenced by travel or equipment access/needs."

7. Conclusion

Though the global pandemic derailed plans for international travel and the original launch of the Global Skills Opportunity program, it provided an opportunity for innovation to take center stage. Universities were able to stop and think about how to make international mobility opportunities better, more accessible and safer for students on their campuses, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented groups. With funding from the Global Skills Opportunity programs' Innovation Fund, universities tested innovative approaches to reduce barriers that were preventing students from participating in study/work abroad opportunities. They sought to ensure meaningful change within their international offices, and to better serve and support low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students through their outbound mobility experiences.

It was imperative that universities thoroughly engage underrepresented student groups to better understand their lived realities and the various barriers they face. This in-depth research helped universities identify gaps in the outbound mobility opportunities they offered. Using rich feedback from students, universities instilled robust risk management protocols and procedures, developed intercultural training and assessments, and built accessible interactive online platforms to better inform students of the opportunities offered to them, all while providing resources and support students will need while away.

When Canadians work and study abroad they bring back new experiences, skills, connections and knowledge which not only give their career a boost, but also enrich Canada's economic prosperity. Encouraging and supporting more bright and talented Canadians to gain international skills through work and study abroad experiences is key for Canada's future competitiveness. An essential component of the Government of Canada's International Education Strategy, the Global Skills Opportunity program is a catalyst for the development and strengthening of inclusive and diverse outbound mobility experiences for Canadian students.

Annex A: Program governance

The program is administered through a unique partnership with the Government of Canada, Universities Canada, Colleges and Institutes Canada, and Canadian post-secondary institutions. The program follows a decentralized project-based design where funds flow from the Government of Canada to Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada who distribute the funds to successful Canadian institutions to support students. The roles and responsibilities of each are as follows:

- *Government of Canada* funds the outbound student mobility pilot program through Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). ESDC oversees program design, implementation and management, and disburses funds to Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada for implementation through Canadian post-secondary institutions.

- *Universities Canada* is the technical lead for the university sector. Universities Canada is responsible for dispersing funds to Canadian universities through call(s) for proposal(s), monitoring and evaluating progress toward results, leading strategic communications activities, sharing learnings and best practices amongst the post-secondary sector, increasing the evidence base on the impact of outbound mobility programming, and co-convening advisory group meetings in partnership with Colleges and Institutes Canada.

- *Colleges and Institutes Canada* is the technical lead for the college sector. Colleges and Institutes Canada is responsible for dispersing funds to Canadian colleges through call(s) for proposal(s), monitoring and evaluating progress toward results, leading strategic communications activities, sharing learnings and best practices amongst the post-secondary sector, increasing the evidence base on the impact of outbound mobility programming, and co-convening advisory group meetings in partnership with Universities Canada.

- *Canadian post-secondary institutions* develop and manage projects, recruit, select and disburse funds to students, implement measures to ensure student safety, deliver pre, during and post supports to students including wrap-around services for low-income students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students, as well as report on activities to Universities Canada or Colleges and Institutes Canada.

- *Advisory group* is a committee of Canadian leaders and experts in education, civil society and business that offer high-level strategic advice and guidance to Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada on the design and implementation of the outbound student mobility pilot program.

- *Program management committee* is composed of representatives from ESDC, Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada. The program management committee meets on a regular basis to discuss key issues related to the program design and implementation and consider areas of collaboration to enhance program delivery at the national level.

- *Selection committee* is an arms-length committee of Canadian and international experts that assess all complete, eligible program proposals to be funded by Universities Canada based on the selection criteria identified in the program guidelines. The committee is composed of former Canadian university administrators, international country representatives, Canadian national scholarship/internship program administrators and community scholarship/internship managers.