

INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY IN COLLEGE: STEPPING OUT INTO THE WORLD



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A young student in information technology completes a two-month end-of-studies internship in Mexico. Is he aware that in so doing he has become part of the broad internationalization-of-education movement? Certainly not, but gradually he will become aware of the openness to the world that this experience has given him, of the impact it has had on his ability to adapt and of the opportunity to master a third language it has provided. There is no doubt that this young person and others who, like him, have had the chance to be part of a student mobility project, come away feeling jostled, more mature and often ready to do it again.

Student mobility has been developing gradually in college institutions over the last ten years: funding has been made easier by new sources, projects are increasing in number, young people are very interested and their choice of a CEGEP is often influenced by the offer of projects abroad. The intensity of the changes in CEGEPs is of course not the same everywhere. The fact remains that by reflecting on the characteristics of young people and on the impact such international experiences can have, we shed light that can put the actions to be undertaken in CEGEPs into the spotlight.

Young people are increasingly interested in the opening of borders as well as the demands of globalization. International mobility is becoming a core element in the training of students. The many lessons, both formal and informal, that they learn from their international experiences become key assets for their educational journeys, for progressing in their careers and for increasing their knowledge of themselves. To give college students the opportunity to open up to the world is to offer them a key that prepares them to become more involved in an open society and to participate actively.

When students aged 17 to 19 enter college, they gently begin to open up to a wider social, political and international awareness. In practical terms, the people who are in contact with them see the dawning of their opening up to others, of their recognition of cultural diversity, of their understanding of the role of the state and of their acute sensitivity to international questions.

From 14 to 19 years of age, students gradually free themselves from their search for their own identity in favour of moving toward an opening up to society (Pronovost, 2005). For some students the process has already begun and their transition to CEGEP allows them to reach a new stage. For others, leaving their home environments constitutes an initial exposure to these major questions.

In addition, during the transition to CEGEP, young people experience a period of great freedom which is conducive to mobility: generally they do not have permanent residences, stable employment or family responsibilities. According to Gauthier and Gravel, “young people are champions of contemporary forms of nomadic life and that gives them an international sensitivity that none of the previous generations had” (2005, p. 23). Furthermore, for today’s young people, having a great capacity to adapt is no longer a matter of choice: they experience so much socio-economic transformation that they must adopt a strategy of constant adaptation. They certainly deserve the name, “chameleon generation” (Allain, in Roy, 2008, p. 11).

As they made clear at the *Sommet du Québec et de la jeunesse*, young people are not only aware of the opportunities offered abroad, but also they are demanding to have access to them:

The opportunity to experience practical journeys abroad (research internships, school exchanges, international cooperation internships, linguistic immersion or also professional or young-worker internships) is recognized by young people to be one of the main ways to acquire the knowledge, skills or concrete competencies dictated by the new international context. (*Sommet du Québec et de la jeunesse*, 2000, p. 46)

Some students, beginning in secondary school, have already experienced school exchanges, studies or internships abroad. They arrive in CEGEP hoping to continue these international experiences. A Canada-wide survey, conducted among 1,200 respondents aged 18 to 35, shows that 75% expressed an interest in participating in an experience offered within an international-scale exchange program.

To discover the life and culture of other countries and also to have a work experience are their main motivations. Among survey respondents, 91% believe that it is important to know about and to participate in other cultures (Ipsos-Reid, 2004).





Because of this interest, it is often the young people themselves who bring projects and ideas to develop. “These young people, because they are the ones asking for study trips abroad, also contribute to the phenomenon of the internationalization of higher education” (Garneau, 2006, p. 6). As much because of their openness to the world as because of their ability to adapt and their great potential for mobility, young CEGEP students therefore find themselves at an ideal time in their lives to try out a first international experience.

► EFFECTS OF MOBILITY

Experiences abroad affect interns as much in personal terms as they do in professional terms. We could even say it is a rite of passage. Indeed, for many it represents the first time they are away from their places of origin. This allows young people to strengthen their autonomy, their sense of initiative and their independence, something that can be hard to obtain in the comfort of family or school (Bancel and Lehl, 1998). When these young people leave for a foreign country, they seem to be motivated by a desire to test themselves by exposing themselves to risk. However, when they arrive in the host country, some young people experience problems with adapting, with integrating and many experience self-doubt. Regardless of how their journeys have unfolded, the young people return loaded with new baggage. They often want to be seen as having changed, as being different. We must not forget to add that the return home period is not always easy and that some students may experience problems in readapting to the life they left behind. Several investigations have been carried out for non-governmental organizations in order to measure the impact of the internships, especially those in developing countries, on the young participants. Four dimensions emerge.

Personal development is the dimension identified first by the interns according to a study by Bélisle (2005). The majority of interns affirm that their experience allowed them to become more open-minded and to gain greater self-knowledge (p. 20). By distancing themselves from their usual context, these young people become more aware of their places of origin. They make their own choices, all while positioning themselves in a different cultural spectrum. It is quite a learning experience!

Interns mention a second dimension, namely **openness to the world**. They become interested in international news and are more motivated to analyze its impact on their own milieu. They are sensitized to the situations of developing countries and to social issues. The mobility programs arouse curiosity and the desire to travel. Furthermore, young people return home with a better mastery of another language and different

cultural codes. Finally, these experiences allow them to become more aware of cultural diversity and better prepared to deal with it.

This new knowledge and competency will influence the decisions they make regarding **their choices of studies and careers**. This then is a third dimension of the impact of an international experience. Following the experience of an internship abroad, young people confirm in fact that they are better prepared to position themselves or to confirm their career choices. They explain this reorientation in terms of two factors. First, their internship enabled them to become more engaged in action of general interest. Then it allowed them to develop new competencies and qualifications that they could use to their advantage. According to a survey conducted for the *Plan Nagua*¹, these internships often provide young people with their first opportunities to develop their employability:

Such an experience in fact reveals personality traits and personal aptitudes that often appeal to employers: such as a good capacity for adaptation, an adventurous spirit, a lot of ambition, a social conscience and interpersonal skills. In some cases this is the first meaningful work experience with a view to getting a job. (Gauthier, Olivier-d’Avignon, 2005, p. 44)

Finally, a fourth dimension involves **interpersonal relationships and engagement in society**. Here we can talk about the development of new attitudes. Interns develop relationship skills that help them to work better in teams. In fact, several internships are carried out as a team and these lead young people to experience an intense group life. On their return, according to Bélisle (2005, p.24), the interns are more actively involved in their society, whether that be in a formal manner, in their everyday life, in projects of international cooperation or in their work.

This observation is corroborated by a study done by *Québec sans frontières (QSF)*. The results of this study state that, “After their return from the first internship, the social involvement of QSF interns increases significantly. Globally, the proportion of interns who become involved in more than one milieu goes from 45% to 56%. Similarly, the percentage of interns who do not get involved at all on their return goes down to 12%” (*Secrétariat à l’aide internationale du Québec [SAIQ], 2004, p. 24*).

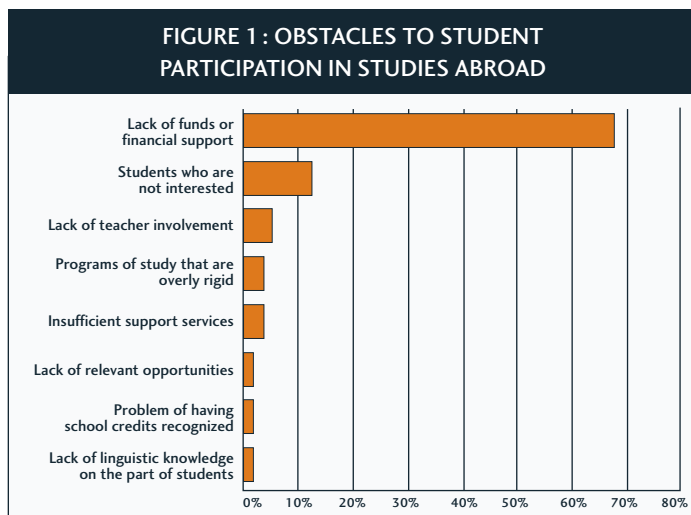
¹ *Plan Nagua* is an organization of international cooperation that is actively involved in the realization of projects started up and later taken over by communities of the South. In Quebec, *Plan Nagua* plays an active role in raising awareness and disseminating information regarding the reality of developing countries. [<http://www.plannagua.qc.ca/>]



We can see therefore how these experiences influence our young people in an important way: in addition to rooting them more firmly in their choices and their interrelationships, they become citizens who take their places in society. Often, these trips also result in a big culture shock on their return during which they reconsider both their personal and professional choices. Indeed, many refer to these trips as turning-point moments in their lives.

THE WINDING ROAD TO MOBILITY

Student mobility is a practice that is encouraged in CEGEPs. However, in spite of the good will of the interveners in this field, several students are beset by major obstacles such as the lack of financial support. An inquiry conducted by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) identifies other obstacles to participating in studies abroad such as some students' lack of interest, the lack of involvement on the part of some teachers, the inflexibility of programs of study as well as insufficient support services.



Source: AUCC, *Progress and promises: AUCC report on the internationalization of Canadian Universities*, 2000.

We have observed that many CEGEPs are striving to find solutions in order to better support and supervise departments, teachers or student organizers of mobility projects abroad. Strategies that have been implemented are, among others, creating websites for transmitting information on international trips, setting up international offices to facilitate contact with the students, organizing trip-preparation meetings prior to departure, offering complementary accredited courses, creating guidebooks for teachers and students, etc.

To these measures is added the granting of credits for studies or internships carried out abroad, namely that they be recognized in the student's program of study. In order for an internship or studies to count as part of the student's training, they must be in keeping with the program objectives and the competencies to be developed, while also being equivalent to what would have been achieved in Quebec, something that is not always a given. Besides granting the credits, some CEGEPs recognize the value of an internship abroad as well as the preparation involved prior to departure by giving credit for a complementary course. The very mention of "engagement" or "alternative work-study" on the report card can also constitute a measure of appreciable recognition.

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An internship that is not recognized as part of the student's program of study is more akin to an extracurricular activity. To be sure, the objectives of this formula are different, but it can still be very interesting: according to a study by Roy (2008), it is recognized that involvement in extracurricular school activities is an indicator of the feeling of belonging, of perseverance in their studies and of better results in school. The social link created within the framework of these activities helps students to consider CEGEP to be a living environment.

Sociologist Stéphanie Garneau, in her doctoral thesis on student mobility, makes similar observations and reflects on some possible solutions:

An offer of mobility presented early enough in students' educational journeys – even before they enter university – has a significant impact that allows them to reflect on their plans for academic mobility and to make more effective use of resources that are useful for preparing for an international experience. In addition, appropriate dissemination [advance information, personalized, repeated] by institutional players, especially when this involves funding [possibilities], motivates and facilitates the departure for young people who have fewer economic and spatial resources. This first experience, sometimes unexpected and organized at random, can also play a determining and game-changing role in the spatial, scholastic and professional careers of individuals. (Garneau, 2006, p. 70)



We note the importance of encouraging student mobility starting in college. Moreover, knowing upon entering CEGEP that such possibilities exist, interested students will avail themselves of the available resources, they will be better prepared and they will therefore experience less uncertainty, all the while increasing the chances of success for their project.

For CEGEPs, the institutionalization of student mobility opens up new possibilities with other countries. The development of new partnerships, institutional support and access to services are at the very heart of student mobility. The fact of belonging to networks makes it possible to also to know about partnership opportunities and to be in a position to seize them. A strong organizational structure is the first step toward increasing the number of foreign internships offered, as reported by Garneau:

The OECD [...] does not hesitate to mention institutionalization as one of the most determining factors of student mobility. Exchange agreements and the validation of knowledge acquired abroad facilitate the preparations for departure, reduce the worries associated with this type of project, make it possible in some cases to obtain more material advantages such as a grant or lodging, thereby encouraging students to tackle this kind of adventure. (2006, p. 101)

To foster student mobility in an institution, it is essential to take some risks, to innovate and to consult experienced players. The integration of the international element into CEGEPs depends as much on young people being informed of the different possibilities as it does on a framework that is functional and open and on people who are ready to take advantage of new opportunities. This type of undertaking requires investment on all fronts. Dynamic leaders must emerge for the various actors who are involved in student mobility to follow. International officials play a key role: they often juggle between developing international partnerships and organizing the logistics for internships. They are the kingpins of international mobility.

A general overview reveals that several crucial elements are already in place in the college network and that a support structure exists: *Cégep international*. Furthermore, we can only rejoice about the grant programs for short stays and for teacher mobility which, funded by *MELS* and managed by *Cégep International*, make possible many international experiences. This is a major step in recognizing the important role that CEGEPs play on the international scene. We can only hope that this trend continues. ♦

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