Mobilizing College Students for Learning Abroad.

SAIT Polytechnic and the Global Education Network

At a Glance

- Education-abroad opportunities offered by SAIT Polytechnic have enabled several hundred students to incorporate an international learning experience into their career-focused, skills-based education.

- SAIT Polytechnic's participation in the Global Education Network provides students with a variety of international learning options, offers financial support to undertake education abroad, and guarantees a level of quality assurance for students.

- These initiatives are positioning SAIT Polytechnic to expand its education-abroad offerings as it aims to increase the number of participating students.
Executive Summary

Colleges, institutes, and polytechnics experience several barriers to integrating international mobility into their students’ programs of study.

SAIT Polytechnic—an Alberta-based post-secondary education (PSE) institution that provides students with a skills-focused approach to learning—has prioritized education abroad for its students and is making strides to overcome traditional barriers in this area. A founding member of the Global Education Network (GEN), SAIT Polytechnic has articulated internationalization as a strategic priority for the institution from 2015 to 2020, and plans to double the number of SAIT Polytechnic students who go abroad as part of their studies. Its formal partnership with institutions abroad provides students with a variety of international learning options, offers financial support to undertake education abroad, and guarantees a level of quality assurance for students. SAIT Polytechnic’s role in the GEN partnership demonstrates how Canadian colleges can institutionalize strong commitment to the education-abroad experience by developing formalized, strategic partnerships with like-minded institutions around the world.

This briefing was prepared with financial support from the Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education, The Conference Board of Canada.

Why Don’t More Students Study Abroad?

Canadian colleges, institutes, and universities know the value of study abroad for students, and almost all institutions offer education-abroad opportunities, including semester exchanges, short-term study tours, and service learning. Yet, few Canadian post-secondary students participate in out-of-country learning experiences—only 3.1 per cent of full-time

1 This estimate is from a 2014 survey of Canadian universities. Universities Canada, Canada’s Universities in the World; Colleges and Institutes Canada, Internationalizing Canadian Colleges and Institutes: The First National Report on International Education and Mobility.
university students\(^2\) and 2.5 per cent of full-time college students.\(^3\) Although there has been some growth in this area—college student participation in education abroad is up 1.4 per cent from 2009\(^4\)—these figures are low relative to some of Canada’s OECD counterparts. In Germany, for example, about 25 per cent of students in bachelor’s and master’s programs have participated in a study-abroad experience, and the country hopes to raise this proportion to 50 per cent by 2020.\(^5\) Why do education-abroad figures in Canada remain so low, and what can be done to improve this?

The Institute for International Education sums up the barriers that prevent students from participating in overseas learning experiences with three Cs: curriculum, cost, and culture\(^6\), to which we could also add circumstance as a fourth barrier. Heavy course workloads at home institutions, inflexible programs, lack of faculty commitment to education abroad, onerous credit transfer processes, and insufficient course offerings or faculty specialists at host institutions are all factors preventing students from considering—much less undertaking—education abroad.\(^7\) At colleges and institutes, the shorter duration of many programs—about two years to complete a college diploma or certificate, compared to a four-year degree program—also feeds a perception that it is difficult to participate in international study options and still complete one’s program on time. The specialized nature of college programs, which often reflect specific occupational needs

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2 Universities Canada, *Canada’s Universities in the World*.

3 Colleges and Institutes Canada, e-mail correspondence with author, November 2015.


6 Institute of International Education, “Generation Study Abroad.”

7 Ibid.
and are largely driven by regional economic demand for skills, can exacerbate the challenge of finding an institution abroad that offers a close match to the domestic program of studies. (See Table 1.)

Some Canadian colleges and institutes prioritize learning abroad and devote significant attention to providing them. SAIT Polytechnic (SAIT)—an Alberta-based, post-secondary education (PSE) institution that provides students with a skills-focused approach to learning—has prioritized education abroad for its students and is making strides to overcome traditional barriers in this area. A founding member of the Global Education Network (GEN), SAIT has articulated internationalization as a strategic priority for the institution from 2015 to 2020, and plans to double the number of SAIT students who go abroad.

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Table 1
Barriers to Students Participating in Education Abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Circumstance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• direct cost of participation: tuition, travel, accommodations, and lost wages from employment in home country;</td>
<td>• heavy course workloads, inflexible programs at home institutions, and lack of integration of education abroad into curriculum;</td>
<td>• lack of faculty commitment to education abroad;</td>
<td>• employment or other opportunities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• insufficient financial aid/scholarships to participate.</td>
<td>• onerous credit transfer processes;</td>
<td>• lack of awareness of education-abroad opportunities and benefits;</td>
<td>• family obligations and other responsibilities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• few for-credit opportunities and lack of official recognition for participation;</td>
<td>• discomfort with unfamiliar locales, cultures, and languages;</td>
<td>• health or security concerns related to travel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• insufficient course offerings or faculty specialists at host institutions.</td>
<td>• inadequate support services for participating and returning students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Institute for International Education; Universities Canada; Canadian Bureau for International Education; Higher Education Strategy Associates.

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8 Ibid.  
9 See Global Education Network, Become a Member.
A key focus of GEN is to provide opportunities for international study to as many students as possible.

during their studies by 2020. This spotlight study looks at SAIT’s education-abroad initiatives and its role in GEN, and offers some lessons learned about increasing the participation of students at Canadian colleges and institutes in international learning opportunities.

Partners and Processes

The Global Education Network, a partnership of four PSE institutions that includes SAIT, aims to provide students with opportunities to become internationally knowledgeable and inter-culturally competent through educational exchanges and other international learning experiences. The GEN partnership was initiated in 2001 by senior executives of SAIT and the Box Hill Institute (BHI), who recognized similarities between their institutions’ mandates and articulated a common desire to give their students better access to a global education. In time, two other institutions were recruited. Together, the four institutions complement the partnership by providing a small variety of locations for students wishing to study abroad. In addition to SAIT, member institutions include BHI in Melbourne, Australia; the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) in Singapore; and Kirkwood Community College (KCC) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. (See “GEN Partner Institutions.”)

The GEN partnership enables SAIT students to undertake a variety of international educational experiences, including full-semester exchanges that qualify for credit toward a SAIT credential. A key focus for network partners is to provide opportunities to as many students as possible, regardless of their financial situations.

10 Based on fall 2014 figures of 170, this would put the SAIT target at more than 300. SAIT Polytechnic, 2015–2020 Strategic Plan. Siebert, “SAIT’s New Strategic Plan.”

11 Educational exchanges or semester exchanges here refer to for-credit experiences for which a student completes part of the program requirements at a host institution while paying tuition and maintaining registration at the home institution.

12 Global Education Network, Become a Member.
GEN also aims to enhance professional capabilities of faculty and staff, and to grow the network to include other partners. To this end, the network is actively looking to recruit new members who will expand the study-abroad opportunities available. In particular, GEN partners look for PSE institutions with faculty who excel at delivering “applied, hands-on learning applicable to the international market.”

**GEN Partner Institutions**

Located in Calgary, Alberta, and founded in 1916, SAIT offers more than 100 applied career programs in technology, trades, and business. SAIT offers two full bachelor's degrees, dozens of applied degrees, certificates, and diplomas, apprenticeship training for more than 30 trades, and hundreds of continuing education and corporate training courses. As a polytechnic, SAIT works in partnership with industry to conduct applied research, and industry partners serve on SAIT’s program advisory committees to ensure curriculum closely matches industry needs.

**SAIT’s International GEN Partners**

**Box Hill Institute (BHI)**

Established in 1924 and located in Melbourne, Australia, BHI offers apprenticeship training, diploma and degree programs, and short-term study options. BHI is home to three specialist centres delivering industry-focused training in biotechnology, services for small and medium-sized enterprises, and information and communications technology, as well as centres of excellence in refrigeration and climate control, and bakery training. BHI enrols more than 64,000 students annually at its domestic and offshore campuses and employs 1,700 staff.

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14 Global Education Network, *Become a Member.*
15 SAIT. [www.sait.ca](http://www.sait.ca).
Institute of Technical Education (ITE)
Located in Singapore, ITE provides career and technical education and has responsibility for the development of national standards and certifications for occupational skills. Each of ITE's three regional campuses is home to its own niche schools and programs, which include design and media, business, applied and health sciences, hospitality, engineering, electronics and information technology, transportation, beauty and wellness, and aerospace and marine technology.

ITE engages in strategic partnerships with industry to establish Centres of Excellence that enable more than 28,000 students to learn from industry professionals in real work settings.17

Kirkwood Community College (KCC)
Situated in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, KCC enrols more than 7,000 students each year in its career and technical programs and nearly 15,000 in its arts and sciences programs. Offering associate's degrees eligible for transfer to four-year degrees, as well as diplomas and certificates, Kirkwood's academic specialties include agricultural sciences, business and technology, industrial technology, hospitality, nursing, arts, humanities, and social sciences. Kirkwood's seven regional centres engage with industry to ensure that training programs delivered in those areas directly respond to local employment needs.18

A Variety of Education-Abroad Opportunities
Through the GEN collaboration, SAIT offers several different types of education-abroad opportunities that provide students with social and cultural learning in addition to curriculum-based and work-related education:19

17 Institute of Technical Education. www.ite.edu.sg.
18 Kirkwood Community College. www.kirkwood.edu/.
19 SAIT, Global Education Network.
• **Subject-specific study tours:** Students from all four GEN institutions convene at one institution to study a single subject together, such as project management, during a three-week, non-credit program. A different member institution hosts subject-specific study tours each year.

• **Program-specific study tours:** Students attend classes related to their field of study at a GEN member institution. They participate in activities including site visits that give them an international perspective of their industry.

• **Service learning programs:** Students and faculty participate in a volunteer community project in an international location, such as repairing an orphanage in rural Vietnam. The objectives of service learning programs are to support communities and to build students’ leadership and teamwork skills.  

• **Semester exchanges:** Students in some programs may study for a semester at a host institution for credit. For instance, SAIT’s architectural technology program is pre-approved for semester exchange with the Box Hill Institute in Australia. Students pay their tuition to SAIT and receive course credit from SAIT, while completing course requirements at the host institution.

SAIT students must successfully undergo a rigorous application and selection process to be offered a place in a GEN program. Students must remain in good academic standing, attend full-time studies, and return for at least one semester or period of study after the trip. Applicants must demonstrate academic and professional leadership, as assessed based on an essay, their résumé, transcripts, letters of reference, and an interview. Those selected for an education-abroad program are expected to act as ambassadors for SAIT’s international education efforts. Accordingly, applicants are required to demonstrate how they will advocate for the program.

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20 SAIT, “Drawing Inspiration from Abroad.”
21 SAIT, Application and Eligibility.
Each year, SAIT sends about 50 of its own students to GEN institutions, while simultaneously playing host to visiting GEN students. In the spring/summer 2015, students from all full-time programs and apprenticeships were eligible to study project management at BHI in Melbourne, where they worked in teams on a real project for an organization in Australia.22 Others undertook a volunteer service learning assignment in Peru.23 Students in film video production, instrumentation engineering technology, travel tourism, professional cooking, baking and pastry arts, marketing, hospitality management, library information technology, paramedicine, and aerospace programs were eligible for a short-term, non-credit, study-abroad session in Singapore and Melbourne, where they met others from the three partner institutions, joined classes related to their field of study at the host institution, visited businesses in their industry sector, and attended social and cultural events.

SAIT offers other education-abroad opportunities falling outside the purview of the Global Education Network. Offerings vary by department, faculty, and student interest. SAIT’s study-abroad team and individual departments offer information sessions each year to inform students about the opportunities available. These opportunities are often open to students on a competitive basis, based on their grade point average (GPA) and a written statement of interest. Other education-abroad opportunities at SAIT have enabled students to learn in France, England, Spain, Peru, Morocco, Denmark, the United States, Guatemala, Italy, Scotland, Turkey, Cuba, United Arab Emirates, Ghana, and Vietnam.24

Resources for Education Abroad

All GEN member institutions are not-for-profit, publicly funded colleges specializing in two-year associate’s degree or diploma programs.25 Each of the GEN partners has a dedicated study-abroad office that provides

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22 SAIT, “GEN: Short-term Project Management Exchange to BHI in Australia.”
23 SAIT, “GEN: Service Learning in Peru.”
24 SAIT, Study Abroad; The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
25 GEN, Become a Member.
pre-departure support to their own students and in-program support to visiting students. At SAIT, bursaries of $2,000 are available to students who participate in Global Education Network programs. This bursary covers a large portion of short-term study-abroad trips.26

**Innovations**

The SAIT and GEN study-abroad options include collaborative projects and innovative course offerings. One example of this is a course on design thinking, developed by one of the GEN partners. According to SAIT’s study-abroad coordinator, this course was not previously offered at SAIT and it has proven to be a popular course that the partners intend to offer again in the future.27

SAIT is building sustainable relationships between GEN partner institutions and other organizations.28 These relationships facilitate future opportunities for students and staff to interact with business leaders and markets in the regions of GEN institutions,29 and enhance the ability of students to obtain employment at international locations following graduation.

**Challenges**

SAIT is challenged to ensure that students participating in semester exchanges are able to complete their programs on time. Even though SAIT and its partner institutions have closely mapped the GEN programs eligible for semester exchanges, there are occasions when a student might need to make up a requirement they missed during their semester abroad. In these cases, SAIT makes provisions for students to complete courses online to ensure they remain on track to complete their

26 SAIT, *Upcoming Trips.*
27 The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
28 SAIT, “Drawing Inspiration from Abroad.”
29 GEN, *Become a Member.*
Going forward, SAIT will continue to encounter the challenge of identifying semester exchange partnerships that are closely matched to SAIT’s program requirements.

With its commitment to double the number of students going abroad for part of their studies between 2015 and 2020 (as part of GEN programs and other SAIT offerings), SAIT can anticipate some future challenges. Firstly, it will need to expand the number of education-abroad offerings to create opportunities for the increased number of participants it wishes to see. Faculty and staff engagement may also require increased support to develop education-abroad programming, and to seek out new institutional partnerships. One area for continued growth opportunities is in non-English-speaking countries. A recent survey of SAIT students indicated that half are interested in undertaking education abroad in a non-English-speaking destination, particularly Japan and parts of Europe. Presently, GEN partners are all in English-speaking destinations. By expanding opportunities in non-English-speaking countries, SAIT will likely need to consider ways to support the language training needs of its students.

A second challenge to increasing education-abroad numbers is the financial barrier. As for students of many institutions, cost is a major barrier for SAIT students considering international study, and more scholarships and bursaries undoubtedly will be necessary to achieve the polytechnic’s growth targets. The overall expansion of SAIT’s education-abroad programs is likely to require a commitment of more financial and human resources to support the increased activity.

30 The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
31 SAIT Polytechnic, 2015–2020 Strategic Plan; Siebert, “SAIT’s New Strategic Plan.”
32 The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
33 Ibid.
Keys to Success

SAIT’s education-abroad opportunities and the GEN partnership are putting the polytechnic in a good position to increase its options for learning abroad over the next five years. Some of SAIT’s keys to success in this area include:

- **Strong relationships with GEN partner institutions**: The GEN partnership guarantees a level of quality and commitment on the part of each of the partner institutions. The administrators and education-abroad staff from all four institutions have developed close ties with one another, and there is a strong understanding that students from any of the partner schools will be well-supported when visiting for a study tour or exchange. Regular teleconference meetings, in which all partner institutions participate, bolsters this relationship between staff.34

- **Variety of educational opportunities**: The different types of educational opportunities, including short study tours, semester exchanges, and service learning, provide students with an array of options to suit their interests and fit their unique considerations. The range of GEN partners also provides students access to three institutions that are varied in terms of culture, geography, and economy.

- **Financial support for students**: SAIT’s bursaries for students studying in GEN programs ($2,000 per student) is significant because not all Canadian colleges—just 70 per cent—offer financial support to undertake an out-of-country learning experience.35

- **Alumni ambassadors**: SAIT’s study-abroad program uses social media (e.g., Facebook) to enable students to share their experiences and connect with alumni. Students selected for the GEN programs are asked to participate in media interviews and to give presentations about their trip abroad in their capacity as ambassadors for the program.36

34 Ibid.
35 Colleges and Institutes Canada, *Internationalizing Canadian Colleges and Institutes*. The monetary value of the financial assistance offered across Canadian colleges and institutes is unknown. However, 60 per cent of colleges require that personal contributions support “a good portion” of the total cost of the experience.
36 SAIT, “GEN: Service Learning in Peru.”
Outcomes, Impacts, and Benefits

According to SAIT’s study-abroad office, about 200 students each year participate in SAIT’s study-abroad programs, amounting to about 1,000 over the past five years. While this figure remains small relative to the student body size—representing about one per cent of the approximately 14,000 annual full-load equivalent (FLE) students at SAIT—it is consistent with typical study-abroad figures across Canadian colleges. Each year, about 50 of these students participate in GEN programs.

For students, there are myriad benefits to participating in education abroad. A survey by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) found that 88 per cent of students who went abroad for part of their education agreed that those experiences contributed to their career achievements, and similar proportions returned with new language skills and a greater sense of self-awareness. In addition, many graduates have found global careers as a result of studying abroad, with the CBIE finding that 14 per cent of its survey respondents were currently working outside of Canada. Participants in SAIT’s education-abroad programs have experienced international perspectives relevant to their program and industry, built networks with students from GEN institutions, and participated in local cultural activities. A continued interest in international travel is associated with education abroad: CBIE research shows that Canadian students who go abroad are more likely to pursue international experiences later on in life. Some students have chosen to undertake GEN programs, in particular, because they see the institutional relationship as a network to gain access to career opportunities.

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37 The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
40 Ibid.
41 Sanchez, “Education Abroad Benefits and Barriers.”
42 SAIT, “Catching the Travel Bug.”
There has been an increase in interest and demand for SAIT’s education-abroad opportunities. According to SAIT’s study-abroad office, a recent survey found that 69 per cent of SAIT students are interested in international learning options, and some students have chosen to enrol at SAIT specifically because of these opportunities.\(^43\) Encouragement and support at the administration level and faculty enthusiasm for education abroad have helped to increase opportunities, awareness, and interest. Faculty buy-in has been especially important for increasing opportunities and generating student interest, since it is SAIT’s faculty members who often take the lead to propose education-abroad initiatives and accompany students on study tours. Dozens of staff and faculty have also participated in GEN tours and exchanges where they have learned best practices related to classroom management, technology, and curriculum, and have shared industry knowledge with colleagues at GEN partner institutions.

**Lessons for Canada**

SAIT Polytechnic’s role in the GEN partnership demonstrates how Canadian colleges can institutionalize their commitment to the education-abroad experience by developing formalized, strategic partnerships with relevant and like-minded institutions around the world. The formalized network approach of GEN appears to be attractive to students because of the promise of legitimacy and recognition by their home institution, student support, and connections for future career opportunities. By forming a network with similar institutions, SAIT has been able to guarantee, despite the constraints of cost, curriculum, culture, and circumstance, that its students receive high-calibre education while participating in a GEN-sponsored international experience. The GEN model of a formalized network with strong inter-institutional connections is one that is worth emulating.

\(^{43}\) The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
SAIT is working to increase participation levels by providing students with financial support and a wider variety of options for education abroad. Colleges and institutes like SAIT can also bolster student participation by increasing the integration of out-of-country studies into the curriculum.\textsuperscript{44} For example, options for consideration include more opportunities for semester exchanges and other for-credit experiences, and greater flexibility in college program requirements such as allowing students to make up missed courses through online study. The CBIE suggests that communicating international education success stories to students—for example, providing them with information on actual completion times for students participating in education abroad, and the benefits such as job leads and expanded career networks—may help to dispel stigma about fitting international education into a college program.\textsuperscript{45}

SAIT is not alone in making education abroad a priority. As international study options become higher priority at more colleges, institutes, and other post-secondary institutions, there needs to be a good understanding of the benefits and barriers to participation. Data about these barriers, as well as demographics and education abroad outcomes, would help Canadian institutions find ways to increase student uptake, strengthen the benefits to students, and ensure that a wide array of students have access to these opportunities.\textsuperscript{46} According to Universities Canada, few institutions currently track demographic data about internationally outbound students. This “matters because even as institutions aim to increase the overall numbers of students with international experience, it is important to analyze which students are able to access these opportunities […]. Ensuring that all students can gain such experience matters from both equity and economic (i.e., workforce development) perspectives.”\textsuperscript{47}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Institute for International Education, “Generation Study Abroad.”
\item \textsuperscript{45} The Conference Board of Canada, interview.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Universities Canada, \textit{Canada’s Universities in the World}.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 23.
\end{itemize}
Conclusion

SAIT’s education-abroad opportunities have enabled hundreds of students to incorporate an international learning experience into their career-focused, skills-based education. Many of these opportunities are offered as a product of SAIT’s partnership in the Global Education Network, which offers a variety of learning options and financial support to participants. The strong relationships cultivated between partner institutions increase confidence in the quality of the international experience, and provide students with a network for career exploration. These institutional provisions help to counter some of the known barriers to student participation in education abroad. Lessons from the SAIT and GEN example may have value to other Canadian post-secondary institutions that are placing a renewed emphasis on international mobility for their students. Further research on GEN will be valuable to understand how its programs benefit students, whether and why students are inclined to choose GEN opportunities over others, and whether this particular approach provides advantages over other education-abroad initiatives in the polytechnic setting.

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APPENDIX A

Box Hill Institute. www.boxhill.edu.au/


Institute of Technical Education. www.ite.edu.sg/.

Kirkwood Community College. www.kirkwood.edu/.


—. “GEN: Service Learning in Peru.” Application form.

—. “GEN: Short-term Project Management Exchange to BHI in Australia.” Application form.


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