

Canadian Studies/Understanding Canada
The International Network
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Background

From its initiation in 1974 until funding was withdrawn by the previous government in 2012, the Understanding Canada program supported the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS) and its member associations. At the time when Canadian government funding was terminated, this network sustained over 7,000 scholars active in 50 countries within an infrastructure of 28 national associations and Canadian Studies centres. Funding from the Canadian government was approximately \$5.5 million per annum.

Within a few years, the program became an outstanding success with increasing returns for Canada. Calculations revealed that sales of books (in 21 languages), films, subscriptions, and income—related to student and faculty travel—were reaching upwards of \$20 million per annum. Not a huge number, but a significant return on investment. A further calculation indicated that the leveraging of non-government investment was “at the rate of \$36 in programming for every dollar in expenditure”—meaning that (approximately) \$70 million was being injected into the Canadian economy annually.

It is notable that a major reason for the low cost is the fact that foreign universities bear the lion’s share of program costs i.e. study programs, conference funds, and support for faculty and student travel to Canada. Not surprisingly, ‘Understanding Canada’ became one of the Foreign Affairs Department’s most cost-effective programs. Success also explains why Japan and Australia modeled some of their academic cultural diplomacy programs on Canada’s.

Some years ago, a comparative study of annual per capita expenditures on cultural diplomacy (including international education) produced these figures (CDN dollars): France \$26.50, Germany \$18.49, UK \$13.37, Japan \$12.60 and Canada \$3.08. These are not up-to-date figures, but significant changes in these disparities are not expected. More importantly, the non-dollar measurable benefits are even more valuable in the context of intellectual and cultural cross fertilization—and also in terms of positive returns for Canada’s image.

Since its inception, the ‘Understanding Canada’ program has pushed beyond the original plan to root it in the social sciences and humanities. This concept widened to include film, telecommunications, Indigenous studies, multiculturalism, environmental studies, ethnic diversity, and a galaxy of others with distinctive Canadian content. Assuming new funding, planning for the future involves a focus on the current world environment, Canada’s place in it—an international Canada set within a virtual think tank.

Present Situation

However, since the decision 11 years ago to discard the program, the benefits have been increasingly at risk. While some members are weathering the storm, attrition is inevitably taking a heavy toll. Of the 28 national associations of Canadian Studies, only 16 remain more or less operational. Numbers, activities, publications, and academic outreach are in decline. Funds for research grants came largely from the Foreign Affairs (now Global) Department and the absence of this funding has meant that it is almost impossible to recruit new faculty.

For many foreign academics who sustain their interest and attachment to Canadian scholarship, the sharpest blow was the rejection by the government of Canada—a decision more difficult to accept when, as noted, it is understood that most program costs are borne by their own universities.

Support for restoring funding, updating and reinvigorating the study of Canada abroad is strong where there is understanding of the benefits generated by the program. In 2019, the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade noted that Canadian Studies influenced the positions of foreign countries about Canada and unanimously recommended that “Global Affairs support the creation of a modernized Canadian Studies program that would contribute to knowledge about Canada in the world.” A powerful signal of support is the list of distinguished members of the “Advancing Canada Coalition” that was established by Nik Nanos and includes a number of Canada’s most gifted authors.

As noted, all of our major commercial competitors invest far more heavily in cultural diplomacy than Canada. Most, including the G-7 nations, have expanded beyond classical cultural diplomacy to include “knowledge diplomacy.” Australia now features “Indigenous Public Diplomacy.” Few of these countries have the international network that was developed for Canadian Studies. This network, the ICCS, was integrated into the work of our embassies, high commissions, and consulates abroad. Frequently these were the places where foreign media, researchers, and policymakers would turn to when writing about Canada. The loss of locally engaged experts at these missions, including all of the liaison officers with the Canadian Studies Associations (apparently let go for cost savings), has further critically diminished our ability to explain who we are and our accomplishments.

A Prerequisite for Effective Foreign Policy Outreach

As matters now stand, we are falling behind and the negative costs to our country are rising. The losses fall across several categories including: the decline of the dynamics that enriched Canada’s academic and cultural industries, the loss of an engine for the movement of foreign students and faculty to Canada, and the dwindling of voices that explain and enhance the image of Canada abroad.

