

Opening doors to an international career

The Youth International Internship Program

You're a young Canadian with post-secondary education under your belt. You want to make a career in the wider world beyond Canada's borders. What's blocking you is a catch-22: to land that first job it helps to have international experience on your résumé, but without the first job where do you get the experience?

For more than 1100 young people over the past two years, the deadlock-breaker has been the Youth International Internship Program.

The Program is operated by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) as part of the federal government's ongoing Youth Employment Strategy. It is a collaborative effort involving three partners:

- DFAIT administers the program and dispenses funding for internships.
- "Implementing organizations" (65 at latest count) plan and propose internship projects, recruit young people to fill them and place the recruits with host employers. The implementing organizations include Canadian national associations, business councils, chambers of commerce, band councils and non-governmental organizations.
- Also partners in the Program are the employers with whom the interns will work: over 900 Canadian or foreign companies, NGOs or international organizations.

According to co-ordinator Scot Slessor, since the Program started it has placed interns in more than 80 countries. He says, "The goal of the implementing organizations is to give the interns meaningful experience that matches their training and improves their marketability, and to show employers the energy and diversity of young Canadians." Many examples from DFAIT's files make that point.

One intern with a university background in peace and conflict studies worked with an international organization resettling refugees in Croatia. Another intern, whose degree was in sociology, gained relevant experience in Chile, researching the impact of a new highway on Indigenous communities.

For an engineering graduate, the Internship Program provided hands-on experience with a bridge-building project in Ghana. Another participant with business training helped a Canadian company plan its market entry into Venezuela.

In these fields and others, internships run from six months to a year.

Who's eligible

To be eligible for the Program, an applicant must be a Canadian citizen or permanent resident aged 30 or under, and this must be the recruit's first paid employment overseas. ●



photo: DFAIT

Minerva Hernandez-Iraheta:

A six-month OAS internship clears a career path

Minerva Hernandez-Iraheta of Toronto was close to graduation from York University when she saw an Internet ad for the Youth International Internship Program from a non-governmental organization specializing in the Americas. It turned out to be the door opener to her chosen career.

A native of El Salvador who came to Canada with her family as a refugee at age 14, Minerva was bent on working in the international field (her degree is in International Studies) but kept running into the brick wall of "experience required." Applying on-line for an internship, she made it quickly to the interview stage and was then accepted. Within weeks, she became one of 13 Canadian interns at the Washington headquarters of the

Organization of American States, working on proposals for poverty reduction programs in Central America.

Just as that six-month assignment ended, DFAIT called her for an interview and Minerva landed a contract with the Department's Mexico and Inter-American Division. She is now in DFAIT's Hemispheric Summit Office helping to prepare for the Conference of Spouses of Heads of State and Government of the Americas, which Canada will host in September 1999.

Minerva is enthusiastic about her internship. "It's been a great starting point for my career," she says. "I have a better picture now of how the countries of the hemisphere co-operate—and how quickly Canada's role in the Americas is growing.

"In addition to that, I've built up a network of people with the same professional interests as myself."

About finding a first job without experience, she says "It's very hard. If you have specialized technical training you may be all right. For instance, mining companies may accept someone with geological training. But for the most part, employers want experience that you just don't have when you are fresh out of university or college."

Canada World View interviewed Minerva in May during the Balkans conflict, and she had a point she wanted to make about her experience. She says she is able to relate to the 5000 refugees from Kosovo who have found sanctuary in Canada: "I was in that position myself 15 years ago. Canada extended its arms to me in a time of need."

How to find out more

If you're interested in exploring the Youth International Internship option, a good starting point is the Program's Web site: www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/interns/

For a list of participating organizations with projects currently under way, call 1-800-559-2888 (in Canada) or (613) 944-2415, or e-mail the following address: yiip-psij@dfait-maeci.gc.ca