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Purpose of the Report

This report outlines the main research findings from the focus group discussions and electronic surveys with UofT IDS alumni about topics mentioned in the IDS Career Path Study, led by Professors John Cameron and Rebecca Tiessen through the CASID/CCUPIDS network. The findings presented in this report provide insights into the perspectives of UofT alumni from the IDS program and are meant to supplement the research results found in the initial study.

The IDS Career Path Study is the first Canada-wide study that explores the career path and employment outcomes of IDS graduates across 14 universities and colleges. The principle researchers developed a survey-based questionnaire for this study, which was sent out to post-secondary institutions in the CASID/CCUPIDS network. Data collection took place between March and May 2016.

Out of the 1901 total responses, 32 respondents were from the University of Toronto. This small sample size limits any conclusive findings we may have at the institutional level. Thus, to elicit further responses from UofT IDS alumni, additional research was carried out to collect qualitative data to augment the institutional level data.

For more information about the IDS Career Path Study, please refer to the research’s website, https://idsememployment.weebly.com/reportsrapports.html.

Disclaimer: Only the research findings are presented in this report. Interpretation of findings are left to the respective readers.

Sampling Strategy

In late December 2017, an open invitation to participate in this research was sent out to former IDS co-op students part of the UofT alumni list server. From the 13 interested respondents, eight of these respondents participated in the focus group discussions and e-surveys. The graduation years of the participants ranged from 1990 to 2011.

Methodology

Research data was collected between mid-January to early February 2018. Due to the varying geographical locations and work schedules of interested respondents, all research tools were conducted online via Skype and email. Two focus group discussions and three electronic surveys were completed for this research. A general questionnaire was used in both the focus group discussions and surveys (Appendix 1).
Findings
The research findings are organized according to the main themes of the questionnaire. These themes build on the topics mentioned in the initial IDS Career Path Study survey. A summary of the main points is provided below each heading with the associated paragraphs presenting more detailed information.

Reasons for Selecting the IDS Program
1. Co-op placement
2. Broaden and enrich understanding of international development
3. Interdisciplinary structure of housing students in both the natural and social sciences

The top reason why participants selected the IDS program, specifically at UofT, was the co-op placement. Individuals who had prior work experience through the Canada World Youth Exchange saw the program as a way to broaden and enrich their current understanding of development studies, especially in a time period where few international development programs existed in Canada. Additionally, many of the participants have backgrounds in both the natural and social sciences so the interdisciplinary nature of the IDS program at UofT also increased their desire to apply for the program.

Skills and Knowledge in the Job Market

➢ Mixed feelings on the employability skills and knowledge obtained from the IDS program
➢ The co-op component and networking with professionals in the field were seen as the most important aspects in preparing students for the job market
➢ Lack of practical hands-on courses that dealt with project management, overseas work, and proposal writing were the main sources of inadequacy

There were mixed feelings on whether the IDS program at UofT was able to provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the job market. For participants who saw the program in a favourable light in preparing them for the job market, they attributed the co-op component and networking with professors and practitioners in the field as the main reasons for their ability to secure a job post-graduation. One participant said that the language and natural sciences requirements of the IDS program also filled some of the skillsets that she needed to compete in the job market.

Among the participants who felt the program fell short in equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge for the job market, they mentioned that the lack of courses that dealt with practical hands-on development issues was the main source of this inadequacy. Some participants suggested that the IDS program should have placed more emphasis on project management and proposal writing to increase the employability of its students. Even for students
who did have a project management course, they were disappointed that the course only scratched the surface of this prevailing topic in development work.

Additional Training After IDS Degree

- IDS alumni pursued postgraduate education in a variety of fields to build on the general skillsets and analytical thinking obtained from the IDS program

All participants had additional training after graduating from the IDS program. None of their additional training was centered on development studies, as participants felt that the undergraduate IDS degree gave them sufficient knowledge in development studies comparable to many of the Master programs in this field. To build on the generality of the IDS program, majority of participants with postgraduate degrees wanted to either focus on a specific area of research or round out their IDS training with policy and business oriented programs. These certifications and training range from courses on mental health, education, agroecology to business administration.

Role of IDS Program in Social Activism

- Participants expressed confidence in understanding the complexity of social issues after graduating from the IDS program. Their practical experiences in the IDS program have continued to shape their involvement in social activities.

The IDS program has made participants more aware and critical of the political and social complexity of issues in the world such as biodiversity conservation, immigration and resource extraction. One participant said that the IDS program completely transformed his view of the world, given his limited exposure to development prior to attending the program. The mixture of courses in natural and social sciences has enabled students to acquire a “bird’s-eye view” of international development, as described by one of the participants.

Many of the participants are still involved with the development organizations with which they have developed an affinity during their co-op placement. The practical dimensions of the program have helped shape participants’ current role in activities related to social activism, whether through initiating charity fundraisers for a country where they have worked in or environmental projects at their current workplace.

Tips to Current IDS Students

1. Networking extensively
2. Flexibility to relocate and volunteer
3. Practical skills such as knowing a language in the country of work
4. Fieldwork experience to apply ideas
Based on their experiences after graduation, participants offered a number of tips and advice for current IDS students. Networking extensively with practitioners in the field was the most frequently mentioned suggestion for current students. Participants advised current IDS students to take advantage of conferences and the alumni list server so that they can interact with individuals who may be willing to be their mentors in the field.

Flexibility to take opportunities even if it means relocating to a small town or a different country is seen as an important trait among the participants. Along with having a flexible mindset, participants saw volunteering as an investment that will get students an easy foot in the door. Volunteering is viewed by many of the participants as a means to get exposure to the inner workings of organizations despite students’ potentially negative attitude towards it. Thus, one participant said a go-getter personality needs to be tempered with reality.

Additionally, participants viewed practical skills and fieldwork experience as necessary to help students secure both a position and voice in an organization. Practical skills such as knowing a language and basic computer skills will enable students to better communicate ideas across different audiences while fieldwork experience will allow students to actually apply their ideas in different settings.

Recommendations for IDS Program
1. Offer courses on practical development topics including monitoring and evaluation, granting writing, and project management
2. Invite guest lecturers working in the development field to ground the expectations of students entering the job market
3. Offer courses that reflect the current paradigm of development work, particularly highlighting the role of the private sector in development projects

Many of the participants said that the IDS program gave them an excellent theoretical understanding of international development, which has increased their critical thinking, but could have extended more into the practical components of development work. Participants suggested that courses on monitoring and evaluation, granting writing, and project management should be offered to equip students with the specific writing and communication skills needed in the field. When asked whether these practical components are feasible in a university setting, some participants said it definitely can be incorporated into the program through the invitation of guest lecturers and professionals who are currently working in the field.

In addition, reflecting on the evolution and diffused boundaries of development work over the past decades, participants saw private sector partnerships as an important topic that needs to be studied in-depth in the IDS course offerings. One of the participants recommended having accounting and management courses as part of the IDS program to broaden the skillsets of IDS students who may need to engage with private sector actors or want to work in this sector in the future. Another participant also argued that blanket generalizations about the activities of certain actors should be avoided since many corporations in sectors that are considered “bad” are
playing an active role in developing projects to clean up their act. Thus, he suggested that social performance should be added to the curriculum.

Study Limitations

There are a number of limitations associated with this research. The primary limitation is the non-bias response of IDS alumni who did not participate in the research. The timing of the focus group discussions may have also prevented potential students from participating but the electronic survey was also an alternative platform in which they could provide their perspectives. The varying graduation years of the participants made it challenging to get relevant recommendations for the IDS programming but their experiences between the years nonetheless offered insights into the evolution of the IDS program itself.

The sample size of nine participants in total is still too small to derive any conclusive findings. These findings do however add value to the current understanding of the knowledge and skillsets of students graduating from the IDS program, specifically at UofT, and are meant to encourage further exploration on this topic.
Appendix 1. Research Questionnaire

1. Why did you select the IDS program at UofT?
2. Was the IDS program able to provide you with sufficient knowledge and skills that you needed to enter the job market in international development? If not, what were the main sources of this inadequacy?
3. Have you completed additional training after graduating from the IDS program? Were they in the development field? If not, why did you select that field?
4. In what ways have the IDS program shaped your social activism? Are you involved in any development-related projects due to your undergraduate exposure to these topics?
5. Knowing what you have learned from your experiences after graduation, what are your top tips/advice for current IDS students?
6. What are your recommendations for the structuring of the IDS program?

*Optional: Based on your personal/career/academic goals now, would you still have enrolled in the IDS program in your first year of university?