Destination Canada: An Examination of the Origin of International Student-Athletes in Canadian Interuniversity Sport

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Intercollegiate athletics programs in North America are very popular. Even though student-athletes are at the centre of these programs, their experiences impact other students, coaches, staff, and the local community. Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) is the primary governing body for intercollegiate athletics in Canada. The CIS offers quality programs, national exposure, awards and honours, financial assistance, quality coaching and other services, along with the country’s best facilities for its student-athletes (The Official site of Canadian Interuniversity Sport, 2013). The unique combination of athletics and education, along with an experience abroad, can be attractive to foreign students hoping to extend their athletic careers at the intercollegiate level.

Intercollegiate athletics in Canada dates back to 1906 when the Canadian Interuniversity Union (CIAU) was created. In June 2001, the CIAU re-branded itself as Canadian Interuniversity Sport. Today, CIS represents over 10,000 athletes at 54 universities across the country (O’Reilly & Seguin, 2009). The mission of the CIS is to “enrich the educational experience of the athlete through a national sport program that fosters excellence” (O’Reilly & Seguin, 2009, p. 23). Although research has been conducted within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) concerning international student-athletes and their motivations to study and play sports in the United States (e.g., Love & Kim, 2011; Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009; Popp, Love, Kim & Hums, 2010; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; 2000b; Roth, 2013; Staurowsky & Abney, 2011; Trendafilova, Hardin, & Seungmo, 2010; Weston, 2006), this topic remains relatively unexplored in the context of CIS.

Researching how many international student-athletes compete in the CIS would be a first step towards understanding how prevalent it is for international student-athletes to come to Canada. It could also facilitate the recruiting process for coaches. Furthermore, it would open the door to international student-athletes coming from countries in which competing in the CIS is not an option yet. Understanding what international student-athletes can bring to the CIS is essential for the organization and its member universities. For instance, finding out whether or not international student-athletes competing in the CIS deprives domestic athletes from earning spots on its members’ teams is critically important. From the perspective of the CIS, both factors would give a chance to decide if the policies established by the CIS (in certain sports) concerning the number of international student-athletes per team are justified, and if more policies and restrictions should be in place.

The primary aim of this study is to identify what countries international CIS student-athletes are coming from. Secondary aims of this study include identifying which gender is more likely to compete in the CIS when it comes to international student-athletes, recognizing which sports attracts them more, and distinguishing in which provinces they are more likely to compete. Also, finding out the impact of language was of concern; whether or not student-athletes would tend to come from a country where English and/or French is an official language was of interest.

Birthplace/hometown data along with gender, sport and conference were collected for student-athletes competing in all 12 CIS sports from the individual athletic department websites of all 54 member universities. Frequency counts of Canadian and non-Canadian student-athletes were performed, with a breakdown by sport, gender, conference and institution. Descriptive analyses using percentages and ratios were also used in the reporting of the results. Supplementary analyses were performed for each CIS conference in order to find out which conference had the most international-student athletes compared to their total number of student athletes and to understand whether student-athletes were coming from an English and/or French speaking country or not.

Information on birthplace/hometown was gathered from 12,453 student-athletes; 606 (4.9%) of which were identified as being international. Overall, the top five international countries of origin for CIS student-athletes are the United States (29.4%), France (15.6%), the United Kingdom (5.0%), Australia (3.6%) and Switzerland (2.6%). Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec (RSEQ) is the smallest conference in the CIS by the total number of student-athletes,
yet it has the highest proportion of international student-athletes (32.2%). There is more than twice the number of male international student-athletes (6.31%) than there are female student-athletes (2.9%). Basketball (8.3%), soccer (7.4%), and track and field (6.7%) are the top three sports played by international student-athletes and curling (0%), wrestling (1.11%) and rugby (1.48%) are the three sports the least played by them.

It appears that 77% of the international student-athletes (for which information is available) competing in CIS come from countries in which English or French is an official language, which confirms the importance of language in the decision to compete in the CIS for an international student-athlete. With French being the predominant language spoken in the province of Quebec, it is no surprise that 63.6% of international student athletes in RSEQ are from French-speaking nations. Likewise, English is the language spoken most in the other provinces. Hence, the majority (between 63.4% and 76.9%) of international student-athletes in the other three conferences come from countries in which English is an official language.

This presentation will explain these descriptive results in more depth and will discuss the implications of those findings in relation to the CIS policy. The only sport currently regulated by the CIS concerning the number of international student-athletes allowed per team is basketball. Not surprisingly, basketball is the sport the most played by international student-athletes. However, starting in 2014-2015, the CIS will also reduce the number of international student-athletes for volleyball.