

Study Tours – The time and cost effective model for an international experience

Georgina Douglas: Senior Advisor International Mobility, RMIT University
georgina.douglas@rmit.edu.au

Louisa Covalea: Education Abroad Advisor, Swinburne University
lcovalea@swin.edu.au

Abstract

There is an increasing awareness within international institutions today of the importance of an international experience for students who are about to enter our global society and economy. Student mobility programs such as traditional exchanges, work and clinical placements have long contributed to the internationalisation of teaching and learning.

Now the Study Tour is an increasingly popular form of mobility chosen by both under graduate and post graduate students, international as well as local, to introduce a cross cultural perspective into their academic program. Study Tours give students a two to six weeks off-shore experience for credit and are an effective way of providing a focused view of another culture, as well as being time and cost effective.

This session is designed to illustrate how the Study Tour model contributes to socio cultural, economic and academic outcomes illustrating why it is an attractive alternative for students to the traditional exchange. A range of models current at Swinburne and RMIT Universities will be presented covering topics including academic guidelines, costings and quality assurance for Study Tours to over 20 destinations in Europe, Asia and the US.

Study Tours – What are they?

Study Tours are a relatively new and increasingly popular mode of international mobility for students, along side the more conventional semester of exchange with a university's partner institution overseas. A Study Tour can be defined as a program of study of two to four weeks (or, at the maximum, six weeks) in length where students complete a supervised academic program in intensive mode off-shore. The academic program of a Study Tour is devised according to the usual criteria for any subject in relation to its objectives, content, assessment and out-comes and is submitted through the normal academic boards for approval and registration. The subjects are usually registered as electives – and increasingly, as university wide electives. Thus, a Study Tour is not a holiday overseas with a group of persons with similar interests – although the travel involved in Study Tours is a major part of their attraction – it is a means of gaining credit for the academic program being completed within Australia in intensive mode off-shore.

Study Tours – Rationale

Here is a brief overview of the rationale for presenting subjects through intensive mode off-shore. These will be expanded upon later in our presentation.

- Study Tours are academically rigorous but have the added advantage of incorporating a cultural experience not available in the study of subjects completed within Australia.
- Study Tours are very time efficient as the contact time for delivery is presented in intensive mode.

- The time efficiency is convenient and appealing for part time students as well as allowing for an acceleration of the completion of an academic award – degree or postgraduate study.
- Study Tours offer a different experience from the traditional exchange for those students who are time and money poor – and for those who could not incorporate a six month period away from friends and family into their study. However, it is interesting to note that a number of students complete both an exchange and a Study Tour – and there are an increasing number who complete two or more Study Tours.
- Study Tours offer definite tax benefits to participants
- Study Tours offer a variety of benefits to the Australian institution such as in helping to correct exchange imbalances with partner institutions overseas.
- Study Tours increase the number of students able to include an international experience into their academic award.
- And, yes, Study Tours do allow for “tourism” which is incorporated into the cost of an airline ticket to the region where the tour will take place.

STUDY TOUR MODELS

Swinburne

Swinburne currently has 5 study tours, with a sixth one to Sweden in the planning stages for 2005. They are 2 to 4 weeks in duration and most of them are run in the mid year break (June/July) with one Tour running for a 2-week block in January.

Some of the Study Tours are organized within the School/Faculty and are run by the academic staff. However, others are organized centrally and are administered by the Education Abroad Office, in conjunction with academic staff.

The Tours are offered for undergraduate students only, including local and international students. Destinations include: Europe, Italy, Germany, Asia and the Pacific Region.

There are two models of Study Tour at Swinburne:

1. Model One - Students visit a partner institution for 4 weeks and complete 2 to 3 subjects in intensive mode. For example, students travel to Treviso in Italy during the mid year break and complete two Business subjects and one subject in Italian language over 4 weeks. The Tour to Germany is for Design students only and works in much the same way. The Study Tour to Sweden will be multi-disciplinary and will offer two general elective subjects - one taught by the Swedish institution and the other by Swinburne University staff.
2. Model Two - Students visit more than one country and various locations within those countries during the Study Tour. The Study Tour is a subject in itself and includes the Tour, as well as assessment pre-departure and on return. For example, International Business Strategies is a third year subject and involves visiting two South-East Asian countries. The Tour includes a number of in-country company visits over a two week period. Students must attend a 2 day seminar pre-departure. On return they are required to complete a report and give an in-class presentation. Swinburne’s European Union and Pacific Rim Study Tours also follow this model.

RMIT

RMIT facilitated ten Study Tours in 2003 with the number of participants numbering 300 – a number significantly higher than that for exchange. Participating students are VET, undergraduate and postgraduate students including HECS and full fee local and international students. International students make up an increasing percentage of the Study Tour profile. RMIT Study Tour destinations include the US, Europe (France, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands) as well Asia (China and Vietnam) and the Sub Continent (Bangladesh). Study Tours are being planned for Germany, Samoa and Malaysia.

The discipline areas range from business – which is the most pro-active – to art, architecture, photography, interior and industrial design, building construction, international community development, chiropractic studies and civil engineering. As well there are a small number of “multi-disciplinary” Study Tours, although these do have a global business base.

There are two major models of Study Tour facilitated by RMIT.

1. The first comprises students visiting one of RMIT’s partner universities where they are based for the duration of the study. A number of site visits are also included as part of the itinerary – such as the Stock Exchange in Shanghai or the World Bank in Washington. The academic content is presented by academics at these institutions, using English as the medium of instruction. In return, the partner institution can send a number of their students to RMIT for a full semester’s exchange – at a calculated ratio which is inserted into partner agreements. Study Tours have also been created to cater for the imbalance of in-bound to out-bound students on exchange.
2. The second model is where the students move around. Examples of these include visits to construction sites in Shanghai and Hong Kong, visits to Non Government Organisations in Bangladesh – where students pay money to the NGO’s in return for access to the work done as well as food and accommodation and visits to various companies in Europe involved in industrial design followed by a two day workshop at a partner university in Milan.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Study Tours are culturally and socially enriching, and teach students about the world in which we live. They have a cultural value to them, in that they provide students with an offshore international experience. Students who are not able to complete a traditional exchange program have still got the option of adding an international component to their degree. This provides them with a set of social and cultural skills that would not otherwise be available to them. It helps to develop their cultural awareness and understanding.

The tourism component of the Tour allows students to explore new places and ways of doing things. They can learn more about what interests them within an international context.

Socially, Study Tours provide the opportunity for students to build new friendships and relationships. They become part of a global network, making professional and personal contacts.

Economic Factors

What do students pay?

Tuition Fees

Students are required to pay their HECS or full tuition fees, local or international, for one or two subjects as they would normally.

Travel and Living Costs

Students are also required to pay all costs travel and living costs associated with the tour including airfares, accommodation, site visits, food and incidentals. For two weeks these costs can range from \$3,000 for a two week Study Tour to Vietnam staying in medium range accommodation in Ho Chi Minh City to \$3,700 for a tour to Paris, staying in good quality student accommodation with access to all student restaurants in that city. The tour to Shanghai has on costs of around \$4,500, while the Swinburne tour to South East Asia costs \$3,400. A major factor in these costings relates not only to airfares, but also to the price of accommodation. It is a requirement that all students are lodged within the same location for the duration of the tour and this can require a fine balance in some locations to cater for the quite high expectations of some students and the student purse.

Tourism

The possibility of combining a Study Tour with tourism is a strong incentive for students. As students are now located in a certain region off-shore the timing of the Study Tours allows for tourism either before or after the study period. Students visiting Paris will also spend time in the UK and other parts of Europe. Those visiting Vietnam will travel to the north to acquaint themselves with Hanoi and then go on to Cambodia or Thailand.

Tax and other benefits

All students who are working in a related field, either undergraduate or postgraduate, can apply for tax relief for the associated costs of participation in a Study Tour – that is all costs on top of tuition fees.

Postgraduate students often find that their employer, in recognition of the value to the enterprise of the employee's participation, will cover the associated costs in part or fully. This is particularly so if the participant can complete a research project which is of direct benefit to the enterprise – for instance, Telecom's expansion into the China market.

Academic Factors

As indicated above it must be assumed that a Study Tour provides credit for the program being completed at the home institution. Universities create content, outcomes and assessment of the subject according to the broad format prescribed in the discipline area. They are often listed as Summer School subjects. However, the academic content is very much influenced by the cultural milieu in which the study takes place. The understanding of business practices in China can be much more readily appreciated in the teaching environment of the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade and further illustrated by visits to the Free Trade Zone in that city – than through participation in a lecture and tutorial in a Bourke St campus in Melbourne.

Students are generally required to complete both reflective and research assignments after their Study Tour.

It is very clear from reading these assignments that students have acquired an in-depth understanding of their topics which has been clearly enhanced by their off-shore experience.

Quality assurance

Working with partners or other entities off-shore demands that constant quality assurance mechanisms are in place. Issues that should be constantly monitored relate firstly to the academic integrity of the program. However, record keeping, validation of travel insurance documentation, regional security checks and thorough pre-departure programs covering health, cultural and travel concerns are mandatory. When at their destination overseas students should be well supported by accompanying staff as well as by staff at the participating institution where relevant. It is critical that students and staff complete an evaluation of their study and in-country experience either at the completion of the tour or at some stage later. In this way the necessary checks, balances and refinements can be made.

Conclusion

The Study Tour is the new mode of international mobility that has proved increasingly popular for Australian students being both time and cost effective as well as academically enriching and challenging. It has its own place within the range of other international mobility experiences available to students today.