

The international student experience: two Australian exchange students at a business schools in France

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Abstract

This paper will consider the experience of two Australian exchange students at the Grenoble Ecole de Management (GEM) through a short film that I made about them while I was on staff development leave at this institution during the first 3 months of 2005.

I will show the film, discuss how the film was made and then discuss some of the themes it raises in terms of the value that such exchange programmes can be to the Australian business student both in terms of their personal development and their future employment drawing on one of the student's recent resume and experience in his first job back in Australia.

Background

GEM has an established student exchange relationship with QUT with both undergraduate and postgraduate Australian students being able to study for their business degrees in their English language section in the spectacular setting of the French Alps. Casey and Lorna, Brisbane born and raised, took advantage of this opportunity. Casey went for a semester into the undergraduate programme and stayed for a year and a half, Lorna is just completing a Master of International Business after a year in Grenoble. This paper will concentrate on Casey as I have been able to track his experience both in France and on his return to Queensland.

Casey had no significant history of travel in his family, no foreign language study and was in his early twenties .He was coming into university from a trade background with very little cross cultural experience. What he does display in abundance are two factors that Bakalis and Joiner (2004) found to be significant factors in students selecting to participate in tertiary abroad programs : openness and tolerance of ambiguity. Equally important in the success of his exchange is his passion for sport: snow boarding and mountain cycling. Both these sports enabled him to find a way into local French society and to connect with French students rather than just other international students. This was despite the fact that he spoke very little French on arrival.

This 14 minute video tells his story and was made on location during the first month of 2004. It was made possible by the cooperation of the audio visual department of GEM (basically one man and his camera Philippe Daniel) .The cordial collaborative relationship we developed enabled the film to reflect both my perceptions and those of the host institution; for example the haunting accordion theme was from a popular French film that the school had negotiated the rights to use, the mountain locations we used could have only been found with Philippe's help and expert winter driving skills!

My aim was to produce a snap shot of experience that would both promote exchange to France and also be used in pastoral situation for example pre departure briefing and orientation.

The process used to make the film

1. The first step was to win the confidence of the French camera man, by showing him previous material I had created and introducing him to the Australians. We discussed the project in general considering possible locations, length of film and cut away shots.
2. Meeting with the Australian students ;45 minute discussion over coffee to see what kind of experiences they spoke about freely.
3. Drafting of initial shooting script based around 13 questions and section breaks.
4. Filming Day 1
I hour interview with both Casey and Lorna in their flat in the heart of Grenoble. Then background shots around their neighbourhood, their café, their bakery, their flat. During this time I noted shots that could be used to back these comments.
- 5 Filming Day 2
Location shots around Grenoble, markets, mountains, the river.
- 6 I then took all the footage (3 hours) and transcribed the highlights with a time code for sections required. This I made into a script (14 minutes) for Philippe.
- 7 The editing took about 2 weeks and was a collaborative process.
- 8 Launching of the video in Grenoble (March 2004)and then in Brisbane (April 2004)

The Significance of the Exchange Experience

The film shows Casey's personal development, his passion for France, his capacity to communicate in a second language across a wide range of situations and to adapt to the demands of a very different academic culture.

He has now been back in Australia several months and this experience has been extremely significant for him in finding a new career as a management consultant

This is reflected both in his resume (which reflected his exchange experience on every page and include facts such as "cycled 12,000 kilometres in Europe in 12 months") and in some follow up research I have conducted. I can do no better than quote his direct answers:

Do you think the French experience was significant in you landing a job?

I have been told by the directors that my experience abroad was a significant factor in my successful application. The reason I'm told is that compared to other graduates, who generally don't have 10 years experience, a study abroad program shows an ability to problem solve, challenge thinking and the confidence to succeed in unfamiliar environments...all good business skills. In terms of the organisation itself, XX chooses employees who have shown drive and motivation in all aspects of their

life, and most importantly want to continue shaping the company with graduates who may not have been straight A students, but know how to lead a plan to success. I'm not sure if it was the fact that I went to France that made the difference, but I know that they did like the fact that I went into a foreign language environment.

Did you talk about it in the interview?

We discussed the experience a great deal...challenges, outcomes, motives, regrets..the lot. Probably more than 50% of the time. The remaining time focused on my personality and what direction I hoped to take in the coming years.

How do you feel about the value of the exchange now you are back?

It still rates as the best thing I've ever done in my life...no doubt. It has set a new bench mark for what I'm capable of in life and how little anything matters if you don't enjoy yourself along the journey to goal obtainment.

Conclusion

I have been able to locate very little research that has investigated or even discusses the longer term impact of student exchange. A recent survey by the London Business School of 100-plus executives in more than 20 countries into the knowledge, skills, and attributes young leaders need to succeed, found that business graduates must become better able to “manage diverse culture and become more global”. (Andrews and D’Andrea Tyson, 2004)

For those promoting exchange to business students the time is ripe to investigate further the long term benefits that exchange can furnish.

References

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