

Good marks, not just a good time! An in depth review of study abroad progression at Macquarie University

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Abstract

There is a long standing perception in university circles that study abroad students have tended to achieve relatively weaker results than other groups of students. This has been attributed to many factors, such as cultural differences and different learning styles, as well as belief in the common expression ‘They’re here for a good time, not a long time!’

As part of long term study, Macquarie Abroad has been collecting and processing data on the results of study abroad students for the past 5 semesters – breaking down results by both country of origin and the partners sending the students, as well as the subjects the students are studying.

The results have been quite surprising, and consistent from semester to semester, with study abroad students achieving at least average and often above average results when compared against local students.

This session will look in depth at the results of the study at Macquarie and will examine the implication of these results for institutions around the country. It will also discuss the use of the data in positive PR messages around the campus. It will be of great benefit to all incoming study abroad and exchange practitioners, particularly those considering their own progression studies.

Key Words:

Study-abroad, exchange, performance, academic, admissions

Introduction

The academic performance of study abroad and exchange students has not been a common area of analysis for study abroad programs in Australia. Students are only with us for a short time, and the outcome ultimately does not affect our attrition statistics. Prior to the commencement of this study, the only times it was raised at my institution were in grade appeals, or by academics being critical of the “party” attitude of American students.

In US study abroad circles, the debate over grade admission policies and grade transfer policies is ongoing. The issues are complex, and the holistic benefits of study abroad are often overshadowed by academic elitism. The fundamental question of the purpose of study abroad remains. Are students participating for academic enrichment (as favoured by faculty) or are students participating to expand their world perspective and cultural maturity?

The admissions policy for Study Abroad and Exchange at Macquarie University has always been inclusive and holistic, founded in the belief that to succeed in study abroad does not require a high GPA at admission. Our admission GPA is 2.5, but lower GPAs will be accepted from some institutions on referral from the home study abroad advisor. This study initially set out to add weight to this theory. Along the way, we have discovered some interesting trends, and taken some “interventions” to alter the policies and support for particular groups of students.

Background

This study has been running for five semesters. The data shows trends which guide our advising and our analysis of the success of our program. It includes students from 20 countries, and breaks down the data by study abroad and exchange students (with the general trend that exchange students have higher admission GPAs than study abroad students).

Data on overall student performance at Macquarie University is a sensitive subject. For comparisons with the entire population, and other international students, I can only provide generalizations. However, it is enough to form some solid conclusions about the performance of this cohort at our institution.

Objectives of the study

1. To inform our admission and advising decisions. The data assists us in understanding our cohort and gives us solid rationale for our admission decisions
2. To provide feedback to partners on student performance. This shows we are interested in outcomes, and puts us one step ahead of problems from particular cohorts
3. To provide more targeted support services to our students
4. To counter criticism from academic staff about the perceived quality of study abroad and exchange students.
5. To contribute to the current debate in the US regarding admissions policy in study abroad

Scope of the study

- 5 semesters
- 2663 students
- Data is considered only on a pass/fail basis, except for the USA GPA study
- 20 countries
- Both study abroad and exchange students
- GPA on admission and completion for one cohort of USA students

Comparison Data

The following statements assist to put the study abroad and exchange data in context to the entire student population:

- ❖ Study abroad students pass at around the same rate as Australian students
- ❖ Exchange students pass at a higher rate than Australian students
- ❖ Both study abroad and exchange students pass at a higher rate than full-degree international students, though this data varies by level and subject of study.

This can be explained by some simple trends:

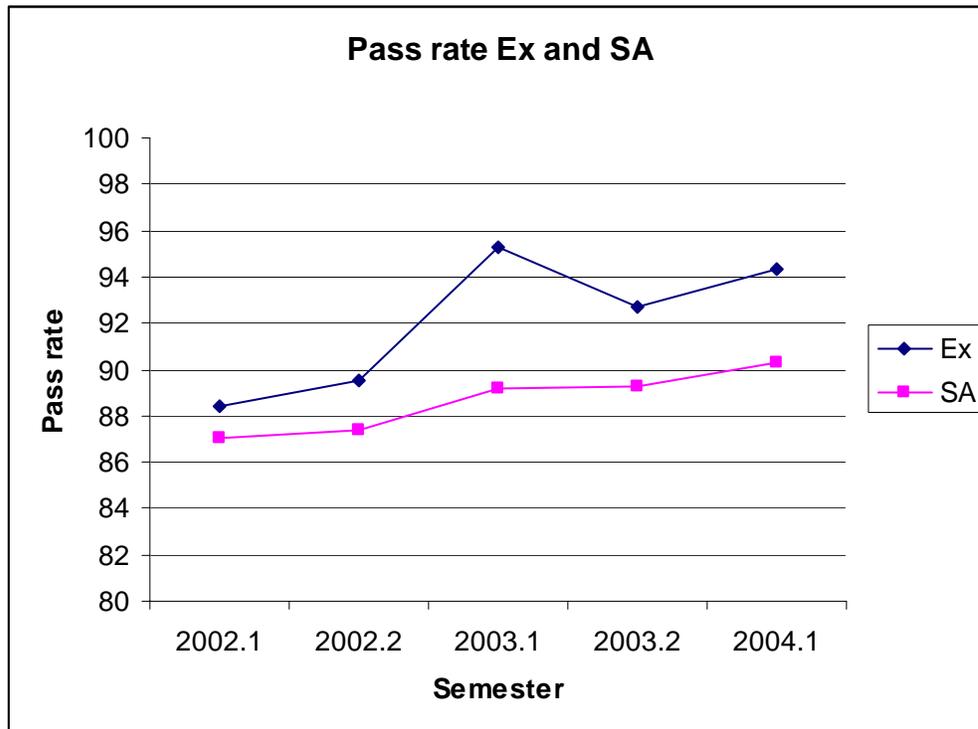
1. Study abroad and exchange students are usually studying a mix of levels of courses, from first year to third year. They are often study at least one course at below their academic level, and should therefore be expected to achieve better results.
2. Study abroad and exchange students, on average, take a lesser course load than Australian or full-degree international students.

3. Exchange places are highly competitive, and therefore the standard of student is generally higher.
4. The spread of grades for study abroad and exchange students is narrower. More students achieve a “pass” grade. Less students achieve “high distinction” and “fail” grades. This cohort is more “average” than the local or full-degree international cohorts.

Table 1
Sample size – breakdown of the sample by study abroad and exchange each semester

	Ex	SA	Total
2002.1	129	346	475
2002.2	120	320	440
2003.1	137	421	558
2003.2	129	377	506
2004.1	153	531	684

Figure 1
Overall pass rate by semester



As noted previously, exchange students pass at a higher rate than study abroad students. Over the course of the study, there has been an increasing performance of study abroad students at Macquarie University. This could be the result of a number of variables, including better advising practices, the increased profile of Macquarie as a quality study abroad destination, or the increasing ability or willingness of faculty to support and encourage study abroad students.

Table 2
2004.1 pass rate by country

Country	% pass
Austria	100
Canada	100
Denmark	93
France	87
Finland	100
Germany	95
Hong Kong	100
Ireland	100
Italy	100
Japan	91
Korea	75
Mexico	88
Netherlands	83
Norway	93
Singapore	100
Spain	100
Sweden	92
Taiwan	100
UK	88
USA	92
Overall	92%

Note: Student numbers from Austria, Italy, Korea, Singapore, Spain and Taiwan are too low to provide a valid indication of performance.

Countries performing at or above average:

- Denmark
- Finland
- Germany
- Ireland
- Norway
- Sweden
- USA

Countries performing below average

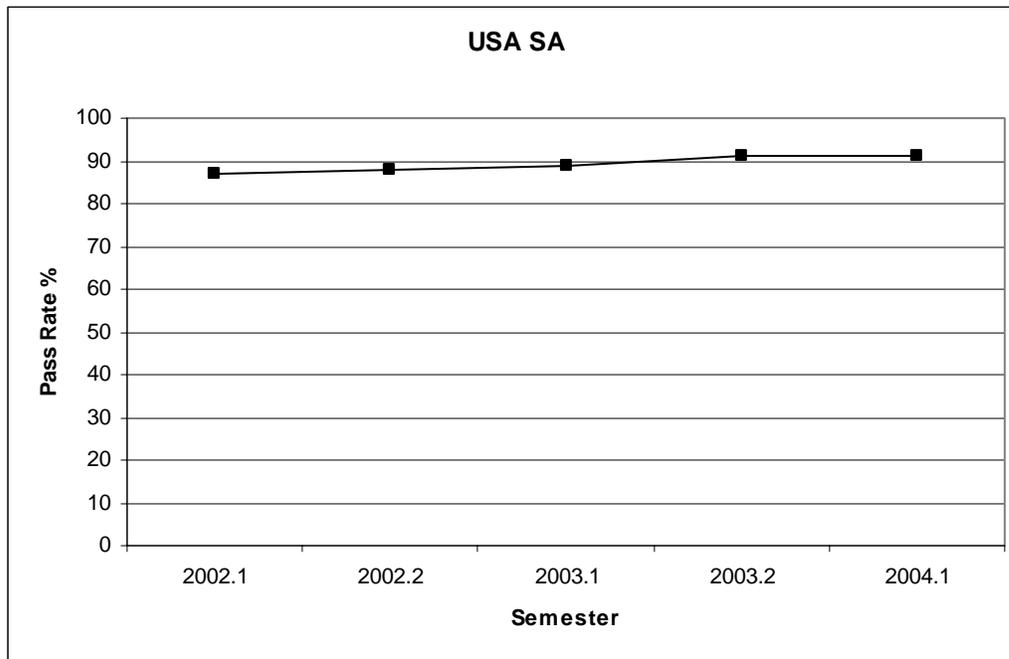
- France
- Japan
- Mexico
- Netherlands
- UK

Points to note:

- Results for Japan for this semester are inconsistent with regular patterns. Japanese students are generally amongst the highest performers

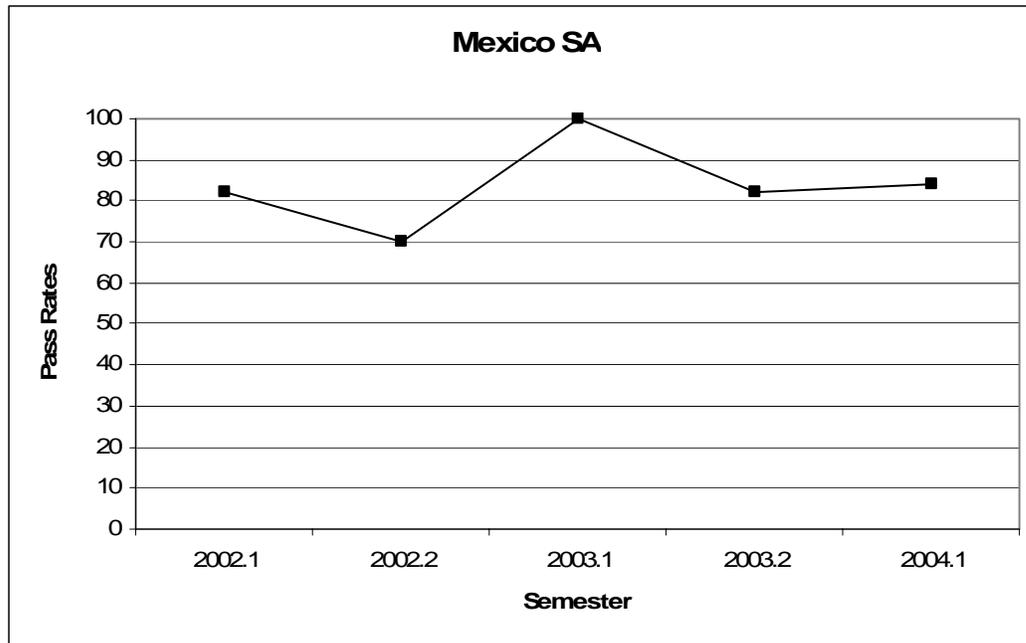
- Results for France are skewed by students undertaking double degree programs on an exchange basis. These programs are more rigorous than a regular exchange program, and lower results are expected.
- Students from the other countries in the below-average performing group are not necessarily poor students. Anecdotal reports on these groups put them in the category of “high social participants” in the study abroad program.

Figure 2
Country analysis - USA



US student performance has improved and stabilized. This could be a result of better advising, an increased understanding of the support services needed, or an increase in the quality of students choosing to study at Macquarie. We can report with confidence that overall, US students have a successful study experience at Macquarie.

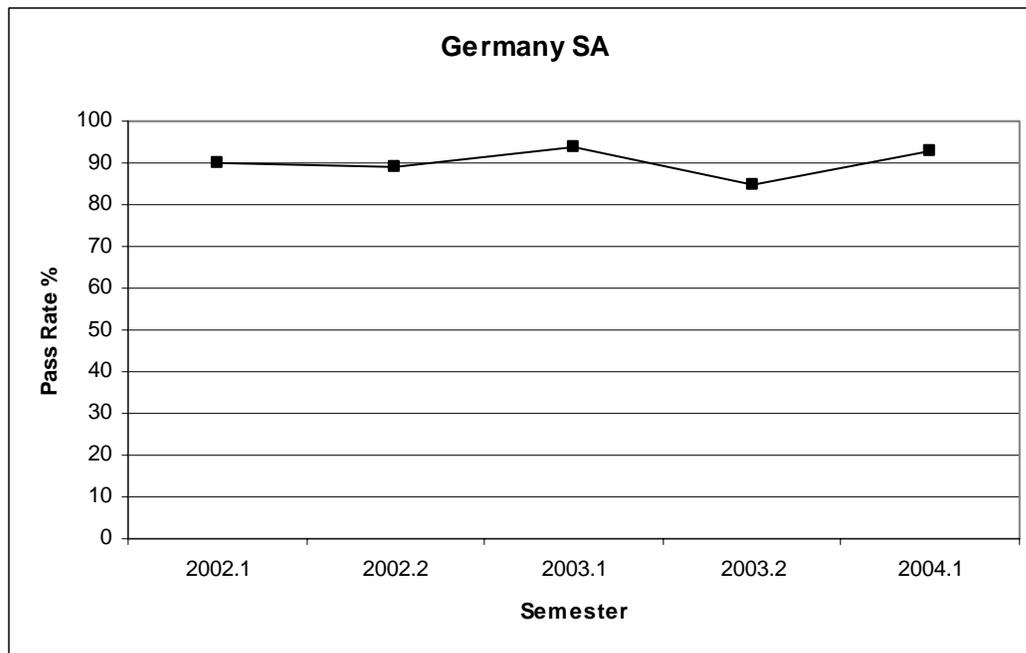
Figure 3
Country analysis - Mexico



Mexican student typically perform at a rate below average for the study abroad cohort. The performance analysis has allowed us to examine the cohort more closely and provide more targeted support services. We have also been looking closely at the impact on English scores on grades, and early indications are that while a good English score means the student is likely to perform at a higher level, a low English score does not lead to poor performance. Other factors, such as the variety of classes and level of classes appear to have more impact on performance than English scores.

This cohort will be the subject of further in-depth studies at Macquarie University, with the assistance of Tec de Monterrey.

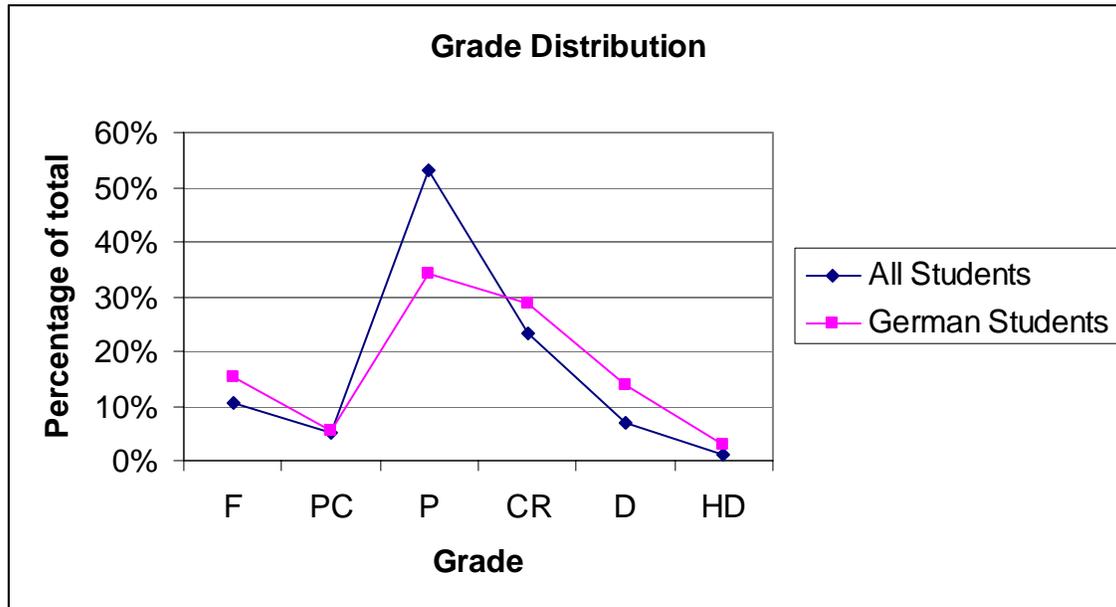
Figure 4
Country analysis - Germany



An analysis of the German student performance shows a big decline in performance for one semester – 2003.2. A close look at the data (figure 5) shows an abnormal trend in student performance by grade. The cohort achieved almost as many “Distinction” grades as “Fail” grades, indicating that it was not simply students failing because they were not capable of academic success. After further investigation with a few partner universities, we realized that students needed to transfer only three of four subjects. Instead of dropping the class formally, they just stopped attending, resulting in an abnormal number of Fail grades for the cohort.

This practice has been corrected through better advising and administration of the cohort.

Figure 5
Grade distribution with Germany as case study



This graph illustrates that over 50% of all subjects taken by study abroad students result in a “Pass” grade, over 20% in a “Credit” grade, under 10% in “Distinction” and “High Distinction” grades. Study abroad and exchange students pass at a similar or higher rate than Australian or full-degree international students. However, the range of grades is more limited for study abroad and exchange students.

GPA analysis

This year, we initiated a closer study of the US student cohort. There is continued debate in US institutions over the use of GPA as an indicator of success in a study abroad program, and the counting of grades and/or GPA on the home university transcript.

The Macquarie philosophy has always been that high academic performance does not necessarily make a more successful study abroad student. Our data only covers one semester at this stage, and seems to indicate that regardless of GPA at entry, student perform around the average of Pass.

Figure 6
USA Study Abroad GPA analysis

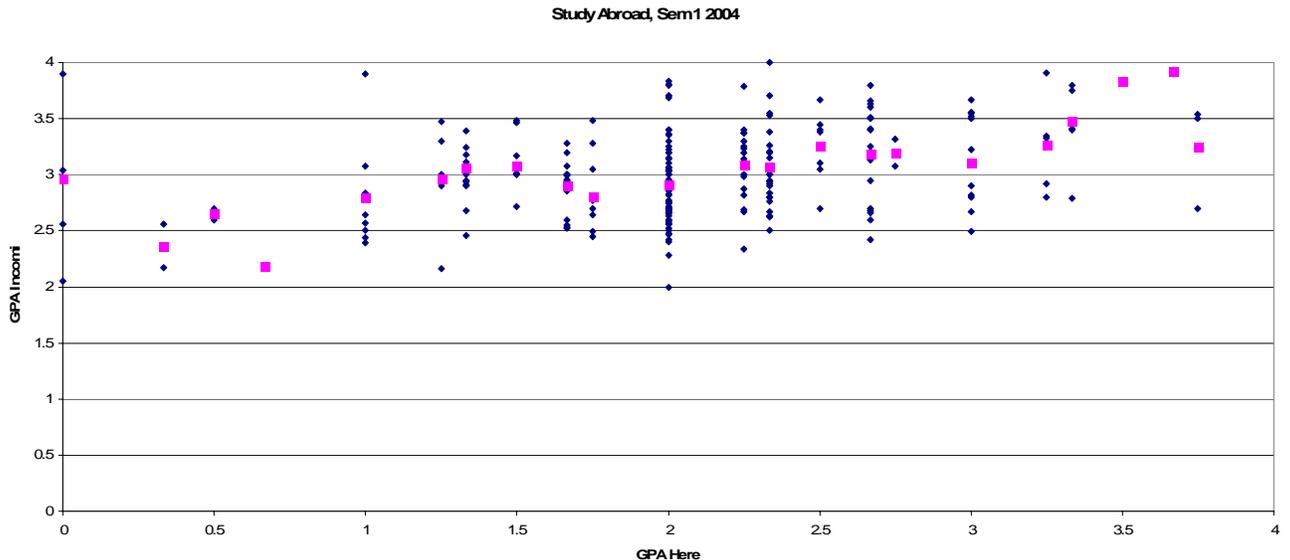


Table 8 shows that regardless of GPA at admission, the majority of students achieve between 2.0 and 2.66 GPA while on study abroad at Macquarie University. Of the 20 students admitted below 2.5, 9 achieved a GPA above 2.0 (considered a pass grade). Students entering at very high GPAs achieve study abroad GPAs across the graph.

Of the students achieving a below 2.0 GPA, one third failed one course. A further two thirds failed more than one course. This supports our belief that it is more likely that a student will fail most or all courses, than fail marginally.

Apart from these “trends”, the data is difficult to interpret without statistical analysis. Consider table 3:

Table 3
GPA exit/entry analysis

Study Abroad GPA	Average GPA at admission
0	2.96
1.0	2.79
2.0	2.91
3.0	3.10
3.75	3.24

Conclusion

Further analysis and statistical modeling is required for a true understanding of this data, particularly when GPA on entry and exit is considered. Without such modeling, the generalization we have drawn from the data is that an inclusive admission policy is appropriate for our program. However, given that the success rate of below 2.5 GPA students is only around 50%, we have reconsidered how we evaluate borderline cases. Our advisors have become more aware of the careful advising needed in these cases. If there is any doubt over the motivation of the student and the suitability for the Macquarie program, admission is denied. A working

example of this policy would be a low GPA student applying to study in business, where the study abroad pass rate is lower than in other areas. A low GPA student applying to study in humanities would likely be admitted to introductory level courses.

The next steps in this analysis will take us deeper into the data to consider success of students in particular areas of study. Already we know some of the trends and are considering the impact of these trends on our admission decisions. Subject-based analysis will also allow us to work more closely with faculty in particular departments in support of the cohort. Enhanced student learning support is a more holistic and preferable approach than the introduction of restrictive admission practices.

Continued monitoring at the overall level of academic achievement of our study abroad and exchange students is considered essential to the ongoing success of our program. Ultimately, when students take home poor grades, it colours the evaluation of their study abroad experience. And while we do not wish to engineer the experience, we want to ensure our advising is appropriate, and our students are given every opportunity of success. The more we learn about the patterns of performance of our cohort, the better we will become at facilitating a successful study abroad experience.