

What students are actually learning on study abroad and how to improve the learning experience

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Abstract

Universities regard study abroad as a way to develop intercultural sensitivity, global competence and global citizenship in its students, yet there is little research to test this assumption. This paper presents findings from a qualitative postgraduate research project exploring the educational and cultural experiences of students studying abroad. The case study focuses on undergraduate students of an Australian university recently returned from studying on exchange at overseas universities. It seeks to explore the nature and educational value of studying abroad by using interviews to document the students' perceptions of their experience. Theories of intercultural learning and how these relate to cultural identity, global citizenship and global competence are compared to the learning experiences of exchange students and expected outcomes. This study recommends that for study abroad to fully achieve its educational goals and to maximise student learning, students should be resourced to approach their overseas learning experience informed and well prepared. Structuring study abroad programs in a framework of critical analysis, reflection and intercultural education would give students the tools to maximise their learning potential, and would facilitate an emphasis on societal issues, thus extending student learning beyond the personal context. This exploration of the educational and cultural experiences of students studying abroad will assist informed approaches to program development and suggests future areas of research.

Keywords Study abroad, exchange, intercultural, experiential, global citizenship, internationalisation

Introduction

Internationalisation is an important issue in universities and interest in study abroad and the education of a global citizenry is increasing (ACE 2002; CED 2006). Yet whilst universities are keen to promote study abroad with the aim of internationalising education and producing global citizens, there is little understanding of what and how students learn in this context (Vande Berg 2006). This paper is based on a case study of the educational and personal experiences of study abroad students and explores if and how study abroad achieves these goals.

This paper argues that study abroad has the potential to globalise students' outlook and identification at a formative stage of life, and usually before they have committed to fixed paths of careers, relationships, social habits and property, thus ensuring greater propensity for establishing different ways of living and thinking. The social effects of study abroad in terms of cultural identity and global identity are explored, and how students develop international and intercultural competence. The study will explore the development of the students' 'global imagination' (Rizvi 2000), how they perceive themselves as global citizens and measure their international skills, with the assumption that the students' understanding of study abroad's impact on themselves will provide a picture of current and potential benefits.

Cultural Identity and Intercultural Sensitivity

Culture is the framework and substance of a social group that comprises its activity, traditions, values, rules, identity and beliefs. All human beings identify with cultures and sub-cultures, and culture is fundamental to how we make sense of the world (Bennett 1993; Gupta 2003). Identity is 'always 'in process', always 'being formed'' and this process and formation occurs as the self interacts with society (Hall, Held & McGrew 1992, p. 287). According to Adler, 'Cultural identity is the symbol of one's essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview,

value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with which such elements are shared' (1998, p. 230), whether this group be national, political, religious or otherwise. Personal cultural identity incorporates nationality, gender, ethnicity and beliefs (Gupta 2003, p. 165). The development of intercultural sensitivity is bound up with cultural identity: both are affected by exposure to other cultures and the appreciation of difference (Bennett 1993).

The process of culture shock 'challenges one's sense of self, cultural identity, and worldview' (Paige 1993). Thus 'culture shock' is a common experience for study abroad students, particularly for those who are confronting a new culture for the first time, whereas prior experience of other cultures will often reduce considerably the shock of the new culture. 'Culture shock' describes the often stressful experience of confrontation with new and unexpected values and ways, as well as the discomfort of being unable to behave and think in the normal way. Additionally, it may be stressful to face the realisation that many taken for granted pillars of reality are in fact social constructions that do not necessarily carry any validity or meaning in a different culture. 'It also brings to conscious awareness the grip that our culture has on our behaviour and personality' (Weaver 1993, p. 144). Individuals will develop different levels of sophistication in their response to a different culture due to personal factors such as adaptability, self-awareness and previous experience, and cultures will vary in the kinds of challenges they present (Paige 1993).

Global Citizenship

This study recognises global citizenship, where it indicates open-mindedness, cultural intelligence and global consciousness as a worthwhile goal of study abroad. Study abroad offers an uncommon opportunity to change the cultural perspectives of a large number of future workers, educators, leaders, soldiers, parents and voters, and develop awareness of and respect for different cultures, and greater insight into their own culture. Yet this does not inevitably turn students into global citizens. Reflecting on experiential study abroad programs typical of some US liberal arts colleges, Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich argue that study abroad designed as an experiential education program for the development of global citizenship is more likely to achieve this end than study abroad that has not been so constructed (2002). Experiential education requires students to reflect upon and critically analyse their experience, so deriving knowledge by observation and interpretation (ibid.). According to experiential education theory, experiences without critical analysis and reflection may not result in valid knowledge or have educational merit. This compares with the theory of intercultural education, where intercultural sensitivity develops from the consciousness of the construction of meaning and identity (Bennett 1993, p. 22).

Global Competence

Global competence focuses on attitude, skills and ability rather than on a political and philosophical ideal. Globally-competent workers - 'global-ready graduates' (Bremer 2006; Deardorff & Hunter 2006)- are required to be effective in the complex, multicultural and international businesses and organisations of the 21st century. Nations require a globally competent government, education system and citizenry in order to be internationally competitive and best placed to maintain their security and prosperity in the global village. The attributes of global competence are generally understood to include cultural understanding, open-mindedness, knowledge of history and world affairs, perspective and communication (Byram 2006; Olson & Kroeger 2001; Hunter, White & Godbey 2006).

Methodology

I have a strong personal and professional interest in study abroad. Studying French and German at high school in England, I went on exchange 3 times to France and Germany, and hosted a French student. I spent a year at university in Austria as a requirement of my German degree. I have spent most of my life with the burden and privilege of dual nationality, moving from Australia to England as a child and returning to Australia as an adult with young children. Intercultural learning, identity and citizenship are therefore of personal and professional interest. I have worked in university study abroad for several years and I recently completed a Master of Education in International Education, including a research project on study abroad, from which this paper is derived. As a faculty study abroad and exchange coordinator promoting and advocating for study abroad to students, academics and administrators, I had a strong interest to focus my research on the question, 'What is it that all of these students are actually learning over there?' (Vande Berg 2006, p. 395). Given that there is little understanding amongst universities of intercultural competence as a component of international education, and limited knowledge of what students learn overseas (Deardorff 2006), this study is designed to clarify intercultural competency and articulate the students' perceptions of the competencies they have developed.

The interview approach was chosen in order to establish what the students understand they have learned, how they perceive themselves as global citizens and measure their international skills. This is based on the premise that it is the students' consciousness of what they have learned, that will represent what they have actually learned. It responds to Gore's (2005) argument for a new study abroad discourse that gives voice to its participants and to Van Hoof & Verbeeten's (2005, p. 54) conclusion that study abroad requires more empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, and that, 'It is important...to start analysing the perceptions of the students involved....to corroborate predominant ideas about the benefits and challenges... [as well as] program feedback.'

The research was approved by the Standing Committee for Human Ethics at Monash University and by the university where the interviews were conducted. The university exchange office emailed recently returned exchange students with my request for research volunteers and provided my contact details.

No specific criteria were used to select the students, as at this stage I had not requested or obtained any information about the students. However, early in the interview process it became apparent that prior overseas and independent living experience had a strong impact on the relevance of interview questions. Although I largely stayed with the interview guide, knowing in advance the context of the exchange in the students' life histories helped me pose the initial and follow up questions more effectively.

The interviewees comprised 10 exchange students: three male and seven female. Three students were in Canada, two in France and the remainder in Germany, Spain, the U.S., Indonesia and Singapore. Six students spent two semesters and four students spent one semester on exchange. Four students were proficient in one foreign language, four students in two foreign languages. One student had not travelled before exchange, one student had migrated to Australia as a child, three students had been on school exchanges, one student had been on a previous university exchange, and six students had travelled extensively and/or lived overseas for long periods. Four students were living in independent accommodation prior to going on exchange and six students were living in the family home.

The interviews provoked discussion about the cultural experiences on exchange, how students had engaged with the host country and how they felt that the exchange had affected them. Questions focused on adjustment to the host country, understanding of cultural differences, the effect of the experience on students' understanding of their own culture and their perception of the world, their experience of being an Australian abroad, readjustment on return, and perceived gains from going on exchange.

Following Kvale's (1996) suggestions for analysing qualitative data, themes that emerged from close readings of the transcribed interviews were listed. Interviews were analysed and responses categorised according to theme; students were identified by colour coding so that responses could be evaluated according to student context.

Student Experiences

Study participants were on semester long or year long exchange programs at overseas universities. There was a range of responses to the exchange experience, reflecting the individual circumstances of the exchanges and the students' life histories.

Cultural Identity and Intercultural Sensitivity

This study found a link between the students' emergent awareness of their cultural identity and the development of intercultural sensitivity. Through immersion in a foreign culture, students were immediately confronted by cultural difference. Students continually assessed their new cultural environment to see how they could fit in, realising that their own cultural values and way of living were no longer relevant in their new daily life. The adjustment process involved adapting to a new normality, as Mark explained:

When I arrived I sort of felt very much like a foreigner. I'd go into a shop and not know how to talk to people. Not necessarily in the language – I knew how to say what I wanted – just the sort of behaviour, just the way you interact with people. I remember feeling very much like a foreigner and feeling that everyone would look at me strangely and that I was not acting in a normal way. And over a time that went away and I learned how to behave normally.

Gradually students accepted new ways of doing things, and the recognition of different ways of living equally valid

to their own put their own culture in a new perspective relative to other cultures. Mark found that the process of understanding another culture inevitably led to a comparison with his own culture, which was the main reference point in his life experience:

I think that's the sort of flip side of trying to understand the other culture is that every time you identify something that's different, it's by reference to how things are in Australia.

The realisation of the relativity of their own culture and their ability to adapt to a different culture gave students the opportunity to develop new ways of being and doing, as Sarah expressed:

I think it's inspired in me wanting to develop different skills, like I want to learn a language, I want to learn to do these things that the Canadians do that we don't do – just different life skills like that. It's made me want to be a more well-rounded person.

Values are integral to a culture and cultural identity (Hall, Held & McGrew 1992) and a significant aspect of the students' adjustment to the host culture was the recognition and acceptance of different values (Papatsiba 2006), and the integration of these values into their own value system. Whilst some students regarded themselves as fundamentally unchanged and had retained their cultural values, all students in this study identified new values and ways of doing things that they had incorporated and in all cases students found that their perspective and consciousness had changed.

For those students who were living at home before the exchange, learning to live independently was also a significant milestone. Students who had already lived overseas or in different environments had developed ways of adapting that worked for them. All students became involved in the community, through their studies, extracurricular activities, and by making friends. The accommodation also provided a social group in various forms, such as a host family and student housing. All students were happy with the way they had adjusted and moved from initial feelings of awkwardness to a comfortable familiarity. Those students who were already familiar with the country or region said they felt at home there.

Students had to adjust their own behaviour, and accept and adjust to different ways of doing things. Adaptability, sensitivity and resilience have been identified as key global competence skills (Hunter, White & Godbey 2006; Rundstrom Williams 2005). For Stephanie in Indonesia this included getting used to uncertainty:

I think just not being too worried about things not going as planned is like a really big one. I suppose basic things like food, riding around on motorbikes all the time, safety standards. Adjustments in perception of how you're meant to go about studying over there...

Adjustment to the host culture was a continual process that even persisted after the exchange, as students reflected on and reviewed their exchange. Stephanie had the opportunity to reflect on her Indonesian exchange in an academic context:

As the time went on, and even since I've come back and I'm doing an Asian Studies subject and reading more about it, I think, 'maybe that's why this didn't happen in this situation.'

During the exchange, every new situation and encounters with other people, whether they were locals, other internationals, or Australians, provided a learning opportunity. Students were adjusting their perspective, understanding and attitude, and alongside this adjustment to the host culture there was a process of self-reflection and self-development.

According to Bennett, 'Intercultural sensitivity increases when differences in modes of perception or expression are construed as cultural factors, rather than as examples of physical or moral defects' (Bennett 1993, p. 25). Difference was a central issue for the students as they encountered it all the time on exchange and reflected on and assimilated it into their perspective and identity. Recognition of difference was crucial to their understanding of the host culture and how to adapt to it. As Sarah explained:

To actually live in a different culture, it kind of makes you more aware of how people do things differently, and that there is not just that one way that things are done. And there is a reason for why people do what they do, and a lot of times it is culturally based, but if you don't know that culture you don't give them that leeway that they probably do this.

Faced with different values and systems, and trying to adapt to and make meaning from them, students compared

and contrasted their home and host cultures. Anna compared French and Australian education, finding that the French are trained to learn a lot of facts, whereas Australians are trained to research facts and develop learning skills. Therefore she felt her knowledge base wasn't strong and felt inadequate for a while, until she learned how to adapt to their system. The value of the French way of learning became apparent by the ability of the French to debate knowledgeably about politics and history. By comparison, Anna felt that Australians were not politically aware or so inclined to debate. Troubled by the comparative lack of political engagement in Australia, Anna considered how she herself might become more engaged. By this kind of interaction with different values and ways, students would often question themselves and their own culture, and come to appreciate their own culture and values. Comparisons and some stereotypical understandings provided students with insight into their own culture, which Hunter identifies as crucial for the development of global competence (Hunter, White & Godbey 2006, p. 279).

Study abroad gave the students a new perspective on Australian culture and identity (McNamee & Faulkner 2001). Differences highlighted aspects of Australian culture and prompted the students to evaluate their culture by comparison:

I found I was forced to justify some of the Australian things that we do and some things that I didn't realise were Australian culture, I thought everybody did it... So I think it made me a bit more aware of who Australians are, and probably in some way made me a bit more proud of my heritage... Whereas before it had never really mattered, growing up in Australia. But it kind of meant a bit more when you had to defend it every now and again.

Anna described how the intercultural communication class she took on exchange had given her insight into cultural difference:

Because I saw how other cultures are - and that was one of the main points of that class, was that you never understand yourself and your culture until you get outside of it and look in. So definitely, got a new feel for what it is to be Australian.

Their own understanding of what it meant to be Australian was a critical learning experience. Students learned how much of their own identity was formed by their culture (Weaver 1993, p. 144). Consciousness of this empowered the students to conceive of themselves in different ways (Bennett 1993; Shaules 2007), as Anna described:

...being able to realise who you are and what your culture has instilled in you and why you do things, then how it can be different.

A Global Perspective

The students observed that Australia's geographical and historical position puts it in a rather insignificant position in comparison to North America and Europe, culturally and politically. Not only did Australia look different from this new found perspective, but also the rest of the world. The students in Europe noticed the international dynamics of the European Union and its integration of countries, so that by comparison Australia was quite isolated, as Mark explained:

...being in Europe in general, you feel much more connected with the rest of the world. You feel like you're actually close to things, or that things are happening nearby, whereas in Australia you feel like you're a long way away from everything else... I think an awareness of what is going on over there and the sort of things that are happening, and the opportunities, probably changes the way I look at things over here.

Students' global perspectives varied in depth and breadth, both in the way students viewed their future beyond Australia, and in the insights that they had gained into different ways of understanding and interpreting the world. For some students study abroad was a step towards their intention to live and work overseas. Other students expressed a new-found interest in working overseas, or a desire for further travel.

Return and Readjustment

All students identified some difficulties in readjusting to life back in Australia. One of the common frustrations expressed by students was the inability to share their experiences. Clare found the experience difficult to

communicate:

... I'd get home and people would say, 'How was it?' and I couldn't answer – I'd just say, 'Good.' Because it was like I couldn't articulate this massive, massive experience that's so different... And people didn't really want to know either – which most people say. I didn't want to talk about it either – or I couldn't. Not that I didn't want to but I couldn't express it.

Some students were trying to find ways of incorporating their new values, knowledge and attitudes into life in Australia so as not to revert to their old normality and lose what they had gained. However, students found that this new dimension lost much of its power back home, if it was not immediately relevant, except where students had consolidated and entrenched new perspectives and values through repeated overseas experience. Students did not have the resources to articulate their experience and thereby reinforce, comprehend and retain it.

Students regarded study abroad as a huge learning experience, due to the challenges and opportunities it presented, as Mark explained:

You can learn a whole lot of things that go beyond just studying, which you're not going to learn in any other way. And I think it's also quite a good time in life to do it.

Whilst the students appreciated the academic benefits of studying overseas, the personal and social learning were the outstanding aspect. For those students who had not previously lived overseas study abroad was a life-changing experience.

Nearly all students cited self-confidence as a significant gain from their experience. Learning to adapt to a strange environment showed the students their capability of dealing with new challenges and stresses. A new knowledge of the world and insight into other cultures was appreciated by all students. Learning how to communicate with people from different cultures and backgrounds was something that they could apply both in foreign environments and in their daily lives.

Conclusion

There is much evidence that intercultural learning is a main outcome for these students, and that through the learning process students have gained a new perspective of themselves, their future, and the world that they live in. Whilst it can be shown that there is achievement of skills in global and intercultural competence, and that students have developed varying levels of global consciousness, the notion of global citizenship is not evident from the students' accounts. The following chapter will explore how these outcomes can inform future strategies and goals.

Student Learning – what we can learn from their experience

The study found different levels of cultural awareness amongst the students. Variation in cultural awareness was dependent on individual student context as there was no pedagogical framework to modify the level of learning. This highlights the haphazard way of learning and the loss of possible learning opportunities through lack of guidance. The experience of two students who, by chance, enrolled in classes overseas that focused on human behaviour shows the different kind of learning that ensues when combining theory with experience (one subject concerned organisational behaviour, the other intercultural communication). Each student strongly recommended their subject as useful in the exchange context because it helped them understand their experiences. For students to fully understand and appreciate what and how they are learning experientially, they need to be able to reflect on the process with some insight. Following Dewey's principle that learning is thinking about experience, the importance of consciousness and understanding is emphasised through much of the research concerning evaluation of the study abroad experience (Ehrenreich 2006; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich 2002; Tarp 2006; Vande Berg 2006).

As there was no formalised structure to debrief returning students, in many cases the research interview was the first opportunity for the students to reflect on and discuss their experiences, which was evident where there was difficulty in articulating what they had learned and the significance of their experience. Although students identified a great deal that they had learnt on exchange, there was not much opportunity for further reflection when they returned. Students had plunged straight back into their studies, or a new job, with the added pressures of readjusting to their old environment, and found they were isolated from their exchange experience by being unable to share it with

anyone. Some students had heard of friends being unable to reconnect with their exchange experience and were concerned not to lose the new outlook they had gained. The resonance of study abroad experiences receding to little more than distant memories is a possibility where the experience is not further developed during the subsequent return to study (Ehrenreich 2006, p. 195). Universities and their student mobility units could play a significant role in helping students to understand, consolidate and integrate their learning experiences. Without policy and practice to incorporate the study abroad experience into student learning at the home institution, students are denied the resources of the university to extend the learning experience, thus reinforcing the marginal position of study abroad.

Comparison to Hunter's global competence skills (Hunter, White & Godbey 2006) indicates that students in this study have gained a number of these skills, particularly intercultural sensitivity, adaptability, self-knowledge and substantive knowledge. Most students indicated a desire to live and work overseas either temporarily or permanently and were confident that the skills gained through study abroad would prepare them for this. Whilst this study has not sought to measure the extent of students' global competency, findings suggest that the study abroad experience has enabled the consolidation and further development of existing competency, and laid a foundation of basic skills for less experienced students. Further experience or training could develop these skills, and an initial step might be to acknowledge and assess students' development to date and advise what further steps they might take.

Potential for global citizenship is suggested by this study in terms of the development of intercultural and global competency skills, and a global consciousness. However, the findings did not indicate that the students developed a concept of global citizenship. In order to develop global citizenship this paper recommends structuring study abroad programs in a framework of critical analysis, reflection and intercultural education in order to give students the tools to maximise their learning potential, with an emphasis on societal issues (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich (2002).

Future pathways for study abroad

In view of the complexity of the issues that students are dealing with in study abroad, such as identity, intercultural learning and living in a globalised society, this study recommends that students are given the resources to approach their overseas learning experience informed and well-prepared. It is also recommended that study abroad learning extends beyond the students' return, so that students can evaluate their experience and learn how they can apply their knowledge and understanding to their studies and future career.

Both experiential and intercultural educations involve a program of preparation and guidance through the educative experience that could be valuably applied to study abroad. Quality and breadth of preparation, on-site guidance and post-sojourn analysis vary widely amongst study abroad programs. An academic framework would enable clear articulation of how and what students learn on study abroad, thus defining and legitimising its pedagogical and developmental value.

Examples of structured learning may vary in emphasis and detail, but generally involve the definition of desired competencies and the preparation needed to achieve these competencies (Rollins, 2009). A curriculum commonly includes coursework on subjects such as intercultural learning, globalisation, and international relations to be undertaken before the study abroad experience. The study abroad itself may incorporate service learning, journal-keeping, or analysis of an aspect of the host country. On return students are required to reflect upon and articulate their experience and use their learning in a capstone project, seminar or major subject. (Brockington & Wiedenhoef, 2009; Rollins, 2009; Hovland et al, 2009)

Further research is recommended to identify effective ways of structuring study abroad programs. A comparative study of learning outcomes for experiential education programs, intercultural training programs and unsupported study abroad could identify effective methods and shortcomings. It would be useful to compare research on student outcomes from different countries, so that culturally specific issues could be identified. Given the wide range of study abroad programs available, further research might explore the outcomes that each type achieves, so that specific types of learning can be addressed strategically.

Universities and policymakers cannot expect that their goals for study abroad will be achieved without appropriate strategies. Much more research is required to increase understanding and drive policy.

This research does not claim to be representative of all study abroad students and programs, but it provides an insight into what and how students are learning, and indicates some of the issues that universities and policymakers

should address. Above all, it shows that study abroad students are privy to a unique and valuable life experience that universities are wise to support.

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