

‘Pushing the Boundaries’: The Benefits of Short-Term International Study Tours in the Development of Students’ Intercultural Competencies

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“It was overwhelming and it was enriching and it was like...nothing I’d ever experienced before and yet it’s huge, that you get so much out of it.” (Vietnam Study Tour participant, post-return focus group, 2012).

This presentation reports on focus group data from short-term study tours to three different Asian countries in 2012 and 2013: Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. The students (n=60) represented a broad range of disciplines including education, business, health sciences, engineering, environmental science and the humanities, as well as the cultural diversity of the Australian tertiary student population. Ages of the students ranged from 18 to 62, with both men and women participating. The study tours provided an opportunity for students to experience an Asian country, meet like-minded students, expand their international network, engage with diverse cultures and gain academic credit for the elective course Global Experience Professional Development. This paper reports on the outcomes of the three study tours, based on focus groups conducted with each cohort of students on two separate occasions: one week prior to departure and two weeks post-return. The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. Data was analysed using NVivo 9, with co-authors member-checking coding and analysis. The data suggests that the key benefits of such intensive overseas study tours include: opportunities for a genuinely transformative cultural experience; the development of interpersonal and intercultural communication skills; the linking of academic work with professional goals; and the realisation of critical and reflective learning. Many respondents indicated that the study tours provided a unique opportunity to experience ‘student life’ and develop meaningful relationships with their peers, which had hitherto not been available to them due to family and work commitments. Data from the post-return focus groups suggests that a short-term study tour provides further impetus for students to explore longer-term international exchanges.

This session is designed for senior academic managers working in international education, leadership, student mobility and exchange programs.

Key Words

Study abroad, student exchange, student mobility, intercultural