



‘Pushing the boundaries’:

The benefits of short-term international study tours in the development of students’ intercultural competencies

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Overview of presentation

- Background to study
- Benefits of short-term study tours
- Barriers to participation
- The Global Experience Program at UniSA
- Focus group methodology and questions
- Key findings
- Implications for future study tours
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Background to study

- Current educational context: ‘New Colombo Plan’
- Third wave of international education ‘must be more than a commodity’ (Senator Brett Mason, AIEC 2013)
- Projected substantial growth in outbound student mobility to Asia.
- Increasing opportunities for students to engage in intercultural activities, including overseas study tours
- Need to determine if objectives of increasing participants’ intercultural competencies are being realised.



Benefits of short-term study tours

- 70% of multinational employers regard overseas study experience as ‘a definite positive on a graduate resume’ (Lawrence, 2006)
- Students who study abroad have greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and are more globally minded than their peers who remain on campus (Clarke, Wright & McMillen, 2009).



Barriers to participation

- Despite agreed benefits, outbound mobility numbers remain low across the sector
- Main factors hindering student participation in exchange opportunities: family commitments, work, sport, space within students' programs and cost
- Need for a short-term international experience at minimal cost at UniSA.



The Global Experience Program

- GE established in 2008 at UniSA
- University-wide, extra-curricular program designed to engage students in a range of internationally focussed activities to improve their intercultural competence and global employability.
- Preliminary evaluation indicated that GE was having a significant impact on students' intercultural communication and networking skills, as well as boosting their confidence in further developing these competencies (Feast, Collyer-Braham & Bretag, 2011).



Six focus groups

- Pre-departure and post-return focus groups with students participating in GE short-term study tours to Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia in 2012 and 2013 (n=60)
- Wide range of disciplines (eg. education, business, health sciences, engineering, environmental sciences, humanities)
- Domestic and international students
- Ages of students ranged from 18 to 62
- 30 women and 23 men
- Opportunity to experience a different country, meet like-minded students, expand international network, engage with diverse cultures, and gain academic credit for elective course.



Focus group questions: Pre-departure

We asked students about:

1. Their motivations to participate
2. Why some students chose not to participate
3. What they hoped to achieve
4. How they would know if they had reached their goals
5. What challenges they anticipated
6. What they already knew about the destination country
7. What they perceived the cultural differences were between the destination country and their own
8. How they thought participating might assist career goals



Key Findings (Pre-departure)

Motivations

1. To challenge themselves
2. The safety and convenience of being part of a group
3. Build networks, both internal and external
4. Complete coursework quickly
5. Experience a new culture
6. Enhance CV
7. Have fun
8. **Surprise finding:** opportunity for mature-aged to be 'full-time students'



Challenge yourself:

“...it was really to push my comfort zone...and for me this was really pushing me to have to start a conversation with someone, you don’t have the option of backing out...So for me it was really to push my boundaries as a member of the group.” *Focus Group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour*

Safety and convenience of the group:

“I think it’s good to have the support of other people in a big group like this...if I wasn’t doing this, I’d be travelling alone, and it’s a different experience than travelling alone...having the support you want.” *Focus Group 4, Male, Malaysia Study Tour.*



Build networks

“It’s a great way to meet people outside of your own little world bubble...” *Focus Group 3, Female, Malaysia Study Tour.*

Complete coursework quickly

“There’s also the benefit of knocking over a semester’s worth of work in two weeks” *Focus Group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour.*

Experience a new culture

“...it just helps you immerse yourself in a culture...it breaks down the barrier between tourist and non-tourist...” *Focus Group 2, Female, Indonesia Study Tour.*



Enhance CV

“You stand out from the crowd, not many people do it. You can say that...” *Focus Group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour.*

Have fun

“I thought it was just a good way to meet people, have fun and probably also networking...” *Focus Group 2, Male, Indonesia Study Tour.*

Opportunity for mature-aged students

“...you know for me I’m quite busy with work and family and study....I just don’t have all that time, so this was also perfect...” *Focus Group 2, Male, Indonesia Study Tour.*



Why students may choose not to participate:

1. Cost
2. Didn't know or hear about it
3. Email/information overload (emails deleted)
4. Family and/or work commitments
5. Lack of electives in program
6. Previous failed applications for exchange – sense that the process was too onerous or difficult
7. Timing (eg. conflict with other classes, assignments)



What students hoped to achieve

1. Build networks for the future (academic or industry)
2. Increase cultural awareness (self and family)
3. Prepare for future travel (either exchange or employment)
4. Develop 'soft' skills (interpersonal, communication, independence, reflection)



How would they know if they had achieved their goals

1. Feedback from others (family, friends, partner, children)
2. Use assignments to reflect

How students perceived that the study tour would assist them re: career aspirations

1. Evidence of communication and intercultural skills to include on CV
2. These skills would 'set them apart' from others



How much did students know about the destination country?

- Weather
- Money
- Some ideas about cultural values and etiquette
- A little history
- Communication styles

In summary, very little – a few Lonely Planet facts!



Focus group questions: **Post-return**

1. Students' overall feelings about the study tour
2. If their expectations were met (or otherwise)
3. What barriers might prevent them from going on another study tour
4. What new knowledge had they acquired about the culture of the destination country
5. If their intercultural communication skills had improved
6. Students' three most important achievements
7. Advice for others contemplating participating in a study tour
8. What students would have done differently
9. If/how the study tour had helped in terms of career aspirations.



Key findings (Post-return)

Overall feelings

100% of students expressed satisfaction
Sense of pride, reward, accomplishment, changed perspectives,
increased confidence to travel.

“...I would do it again in a heart beat!” *Focus Group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour.*



Were expectations met?

All students overwhelmingly stated that their expectations were met and most often exceeded. Some key positives:

- Surprise (and relief) that they all got along well as a group
- Felt that it was “value for money”
- “it was full-on...” (intensive learning)
- “the benefit of applying theory in an immediate practical context”
- Wanted more opportunities to network with host country
- All students appreciated the ‘buddy system’ with host students



Barriers preventing future participation

1. Cost
2. Work and family commitments
3. Lack of space in academic program
4. Concerns about competing deadlines re: assessments once back in Australia
5. Concerns about 'getting along' with classmates in intense study mode.
6. Some students may be concerned about not being able to follow their own cultural practices (eg eating halal food) on a study tour.



What new knowledge had been acquired?

All students expressed increased confidence about their knowledge of the new culture, had acquired some basic language skills and demonstrated increased levels of tolerance.

“I think just comparing myself, say on the first day when I was a little bit, even scared to interact with the Vietnamese people in fear of saying something wrong or this massive faux pas or something...and then on the last day...[we were taking photos and interacting] with this lady...” *Focus Group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour.*



Improved intercultural communication skills?

1. Basic language skills
2. Deeper understandings and insights of culture
3. Better understanding of theory in practice
4. Increased willingness to engage with diverse others

“...I really noticed that if you could learn a few words, then you could really make a connection between some people...just knowing a few of those really key words makes a big difference with communication”. *Focus Group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour.*

“You understand the reasoning why they do things as well...” *Focus Group 6, Female, Indonesia Study tour*

“You get told about that collective culture and you don't really understand it but you actually see it first hand, it's everywhere...” *Focus Group 6, Male, Indonesia Study Tour*



Students' advice to others

1. Be prepared, but “don't go overboard” (re: medical advice)
2. Be brave and try everything
3. Think carefully about what to pack in terms of appropriate clothing (re weather and cultural norms)
4. Immerse yourself in the culture at every opportunity

“Try as many things as you want to, because you are there for only two weeks”. *Focus Group 4, Female, Malaysia Study Tour*



What would you do differently?

“...I’ve been thinking about the Hmong people...now looking back on it, I wish I’d taken the time to have more conversations with those girls, because they had such a drive to want to be able to speak English...” *Focus group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour*

“Do a lot more adventuring...get further out of the city.”

Focus group 4, Male, Malaysia Study Tour



How did the study tour contribute to career aspirations?

“...I think it cemented that I’d like to work overseas and in international relations...it’s showed me that I do have the capability to live somewhere and not be too overwhelmed by it...”

Focus group 2, Female, Vietnam Study Tour

“...I think going on the travel, just learning about career planning and stuff, made me realize that’s something I really need consider now and set up my subjects for now, and set up opportunities for

now...” *Focus group 6, Female, Indonesia Study Tour*



Implications for future short-term study tours

Stepping stone to developing intercultural competency and critical self-reflection.

“...it's made me sort of stop and think, well what do I really want to do for the next 12 months. So I don't think I would've done it without this experience, certainly not at this point in time anyway...” *Focus group 4, Female,*

Malaysia Study Tour



Conclusions

Opportunities for a genuinely transformative cultural experience

Development of interpersonal and intercultural communication skills

Linking of academic work with professional goals

Realisation of critical and reflective learning



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