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There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come . . . (Victor Hugo, 1852)
Facilitating international education through overseas study programs: An Australian business school perspective

Jean Pierre Fenech\textsuperscript{a}, Sylvana Fenech\textsuperscript{b}, and Jacqueline Birt\textsuperscript{c}
\textsuperscript{a} Monash University; \textsuperscript{b} RMIT University; \textsuperscript{c} University of Queensland

Abstract: This paper explores how an overseas study program facilitates students’ international education exposure within an Australian business school context. We interviewed students after they had taken part in a three-week immersion program, involving visiting some of Europe and the UK’s principal financial and regulatory institutions. The report of their experiences provides critical insights into designing such programs with a view to achieving high levels of immersion. Participants in the overseas study program immersed themselves in the European way of living and became more tolerant and accepting of other cultures. We argue that as Australian universities remain strongly committed to providing an international education, short-term overseas programs are a key tool for achieving this strategic goal. There are a number of challenges universities are currently facing in implementing such programs. However, if Australian universities intend to maintain their position as high-ranking education providers within the Asia-Pacific region, they must continue to seek ways to deliver high-quality programs.

Keywords: study abroad; short-term programs; international education

Introduction

Overseas study programs have received extensive attention within the U.S., with most studies focusing on long-term programs spread over 12 to 16 weeks (DeDee & Stewart, 2003; Koskinen & Tossavainen, 2004). This paper explores how a shorter overseas study program, of two to three weeks, facilitates students’ international education exposure within an Australian business school context. We interviewed students after a three-week immersion program, involving visiting some of Europe and the UK’s main financial and regulatory institutions, and report on their experiences.

Research into international education within Australian tertiary education is rather fragmented, as studies are generally U.S.-based. In their corporate plans, most Australian universities are now highlighting the importance of internationalising the curriculum (Bell, 2004; Harman, 2004; Leask & Bridge, 2013; Rizvi & Walsh, 1998; Welch, 2002). Yet little guidance is provided in terms of achieving this target. Therefore, in this paper, we explore the following questions:

(1) How does a short-term overseas study program help students attending Australian universities acquire an international education? and
(2) How does the program design influence this process?

International education in Australia: A historical perspective

Tertiary education is currently Australia's foremost service export (Gallagher, & Garrett, 2012), a significant increase from its humble beginnings in 1949, when the implementation of the Colombo Plan (a federally funded initiative) sought to address this issue. In the post-war era, Australia was keen to establish working relationships with neighbouring south-east Asian countries. Hence, schemes inviting overseas students to study at Australian universities were introduced. By 1979, the Australian Federal Government had initiated sponsoring programs
inviting international students to study in Australia, granting them study visas against payment. In 1984, the Federal Government categorised education as an export industry, and as a result, the educational trade was born in Australia. Similarly with other countries such as the U.S. and the U.K., the full-cost fees policy was initially resisted in Parliament, but later became the financial lifeline of most institutions. The Bradley Report (a federally funded project issued in 2008 reporting on ways to draw students to tertiary education from different backgrounds) views Australia as a world leader in international education.

Australian universities focus on disseminating global perspectives, enabling the wider community to acquire international knowledge, develop new awareness from other cultures and subsequently acquire new ways of thinking. We argue that in contrast to the U.S. debate, there are two aspects to the Australian international education discussion: (i) the potential to attract international students from neighbouring countries, engaging them in similar programs to those offered to local students; and (ii) the ability to send local students overseas to be part of study programs.

This two-prong approach is set within a global context of interconnections and interdependence. The advent of the Internet has brought people closer, with political, cultural and economic systems being reported to worldwide audiences as events unfold. Our current environment links people to one another, demanding a better understanding of different cultures and the ways in which people live. The inference drawn from such changes is that international education is not merely a fashionable term coined by university business managers. It is an inevitable part of today's education endeavour. Internationalising education is critical, and its advancement and understanding is a global enterprise with no boundaries. Hence, Australian universities are required to nurture their students' awareness with respect to their intercultural context.

**Does international education mean different things to different people?**

The term *international education* is frequently used by educators, politicians and managers alike. But what does it really mean? Most importantly, can it be defined? In a seminal study, Arum and Van de Water (1992) recognised the need for a more specific and focused definition of international education. Researching the U.S. literature, they schematically described it as: (i) the need for universities to develop international curriculum content; (ii) academics and students being required to travel and expose themselves to international events with respect to training and research; and (iii) the ability of universities to team up with overseas institutions and co-operate in technical assistance and programs. Furthermore, Knight (1997) argued that internationalisation is the process of combining the international dimension within an institution's teaching and research objectives. *Internationalisation* and *international education* are used interchangeably, with the literature delineating no clear differences between their respective meanings. Both terms, however point towards an international dimension to the education curriculum within a global perspective.

De Wit (1993) analyses the Arum and Van de Water (1992) and Knight (1997) definitions and find them American-focused, with limited applications for educators in Australia. From a global perspective De Wit (1993) argues that international education is more institute-specific, and depends greatly on the university's vision to embrace a global perspective, treating all cultures equally. Such a process is argued to be developed via a bottom-up approach, with both academic and professional personnel making a conscious effort to internationalise the curriculum. De Wit makes no distinction between internationalisation and international education, and argues that it is a process whereby education embarks on an international trajectory. Ebuchi (1997) joins in the definition debate
and argues that it is a process whereby the university's teaching and research becomes internationally and cross-culturally acceptable.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (hereafter, AUCC) noted in 2006 that there is no simple over-arching definition of international education. It consists of a number of activities, aimed at providing intensity to an educational experience within an environment encapsulating a global perspective. Researchers attempt to define international education within one over-arching statement sometimes attempting to oversimplify the phenomenon (Toh, 2012). The feeling that there is no encompassing definition is a common sentiment amongst researchers and educators (Montrose, 2008). The formulation and implementation of internationalisation was originally a U.S. concept, attempting to strategically place educational institutions within a global perspective. This catch-all phrase for everything and anything international is not the ideal approach to this issue, and a more focused definition is required to address a university’s culture and its student cohort.

**Benefits of international education**

One way to analyse international education is to discuss its benefits: the anticipated consequences are global citizens with the ability to tap into different networks. The process enriches a student's social experiences, ultimately adding value to society. Lane and DiStefano (1992) argue that internationalisation is achieved only when a culture is understood, where the dialectic relationship between theory and practice is minimised as participants experience it first-hand. Dicken (1992) argues that the economic demand for worldwide labour and resources is satisfied through educational institutions. Hirst and Thompson (1996) move away from the economic agenda and argue that it is hard to put a monetary value on international education. Porth (1997) highlights the necessity for business students to learn more about other countries and markets through immersion. This newly acquired knowledge is a life-long experience, making students more employable than others who have not been exposed to this cultural experience. Marx (1999) and Cannon (2000) argue that immersion provides an opportunity for students to manage their own emotions and develop problem-solving skills whilst confronting new situations.

Spybey (1996) also discusses the benefits of international education, and finds it has broader ramifications than previously thought with new implications for business contacts. In addition, it is also clear that the exchange of students is key to a country's diplomatic efforts. Education is treated as a critical dimension in any country's foreign policy, as neighbouring countries in a geographic region are required to work together and develop healthy relationships, improving the country's image and setting policies in a favourable light (Alladin, 1992).

International education is encouraging universities to return to their roots; i.e., although there are national and language barriers, knowledge remains universal. It is this notion of converting knowledge to a commodity, manufactured, bought and sold, that facilitates the process of international education (Muller, 1995). The AUCC argues that the main reason behind the internationalising of universities is to increase the international and intercultural knowledge and students’ skills. Furthermore, the promotion of research addressing cultural, economical, environmental and political issues is also a key concern.

Universities are in a position to increase awareness and understanding of the issues affecting political, economic and cultural/multicultural developments within and among nations (Harari, 1992). Strategies like curriculum innovation, study abroad programs and student exchanges facilitate cross-cultural exposure, impacting significantly on the student and faculty experience. Montrose (2008) argues that there is a positive association between international education and quality education, and that both contribute towards heightening
the quality of higher education. Travelling overseas may initially be a cultural shock, with puzzling and threatening experiences, especially if the sojourner is on his/her first visit (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). However, Black and Mendenhall (1990) argue that sojourners are required to move beyond their culture shock and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

These studies point to the benefits students enjoy as a consequence of international education. However, the literature is not clear on how to structure and design programs to achieve such benefits. This lack of clarity is exacerbated in Australia as we argue there are two types of student cohorts to address; the local and the international who choose Australia for a holistic education experience.

**Australian universities and their international focus**

In a global world, employees are required to be more internationally focused (Lane & DiStefano, 1992). In a study of Australian business students’ and employer perceptions, Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) find that appreciation of cross-cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication skills are graduate attributes and skills considered essential to their career by students. Furthermore, employers prefer applicants with global experience (Davidson & Kinzel, 1995). In line with this, the International Association of Universities (1998) is unequivocally clear about the need for universities to be more internationally focused. Employers prefer applicants with global experience (Davidson & Kinzel, 1995) and an overseas study program is an example of how business schools are going global, forging stronger ties with industry (Porth, 1997). Such programs provide a traditional on-campus learning with experiential learning in an international setting. The combination of hands-on experience with cultural knowledge provides students with a framework for an initiation in cultural understanding. Although Porth (1997) acknowledges the benefits of a study program overseas, the positive experiences may be easily reversed by negative student experiences. Any type of experience affects a participant's perspective on cultural issues; it is the university's duty of care to ensure good experiences are provided.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) believes that internationalisation is an important part of the education system that equips students with knowledge, skills and tools to stay competitive (OECD 2013). Open Universities Australia (2009) drafted a ten-point plan of action to determine an ongoing assessment process in evaluating universities' progress in providing an international understanding. The benefits of international education to Australia's national prosperity are classified into three main cohorts: (i) the Australian tertiary education; (ii) its students and graduates; and (iii) the wider Australian community—i.e. economic, trade, skilled migration benefits and particularly Australia's public diplomacy.

In addition, the Australian Business Dean’s Council (ABDC) in 2012 reported that resources are required to recognise the cultural and social knowledge needed to do business effectively. They argue that Australian managers are ranked poorly in terms of their adaptability, cross-cultural skills, language awareness, and leadership abilities, with limited exposure in the global market. More must be done to address these issues.

Australian universities have strategies in place for internationalising the teaching curriculum, with the establishment of offshore campuses, and twinning arrangements with overseas partners. Scholarships are funded from the Overseas Postgraduate Research Scholarship (OPRS), which offer specialised support to local and international students. Gniewosz et al (2002) reports a healthy increase in formal agreements between Australian universities offering international business degrees with overseas business schools. The
Group-of-8 (Go8) Australian universities explicitly include a policy of internationalisation in their mission statements as part of their corporate plan. This is where different state education policies congregate to a near-universal convergence: universities best serve their nations by serving the world of learning (Kerr, 1994). International student mobility is increasing, with students undertaking outgoing international study experiences away from their respective home campuses.

By way of summary of this overview of Australian universities’ approach to international education, it is reasonable to claim that institutions are strongly committed to this phenomenon. Such commitment is clearly evidenced, especially in the Go8 policies. However, it is a complex matter, and in this study a group of students (local and international) add to the debate concerning how a short-term program facilitates international education.

**Research design**

This study is founded on the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, with the intention of understanding “the world of human experience” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36). Mertens (2005) suggest that individuals socially construct reality. The constructivist-interpretative researcher asserts that participants “make meaning” of a phenomenon or situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This implies a conception of reality as a multi-layered, interactive, shared social experience interpreted by the individual.

This paper investigates and evaluates the experiences of business graduate students from one of Australia's business schools participating in a European study program. The study examines the association between students' experiences abroad and their exposure to international education as interpreted by the students themselves. We invited students who participated in such short-term programs during the past three years (as we do not have access to students' records prior to 2009) to engage in semi-structured interviews.

Every year, a group of 35 students enrol in this elective unit where, besides the normal course work, a short-term overseas study program is embedded. In this study we mainly focus on the latter part, i.e. the overseas study program. Hence, our full sample consists of 105 participants and all were emailed, asking them to participate in this study. 31 accepted our invitation (29.52% response rate) to be interviewed. Table 1, panel A describes the participants’ demographic.
Table 1: Participants’ demographic

Panel A: Full sample of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of participants (N = 31)</th>
<th>Gender (%)</th>
<th>Local/ International student (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yr 1= 8</td>
<td>Male – 42.01</td>
<td>Local 33.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 2= 10</td>
<td>Female – 57.99</td>
<td>Int. 66.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 3= 13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Panel B: Snap shot of the participants’ demographic representing transcripts recorded in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age bracket (yrs)</th>
<th>Current status</th>
<th>No. of yrs in Australia</th>
<th>No. of overseas trips outside Australia</th>
<th>Local/ International student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Studying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Gap year</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Studying</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Studying</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Malaysian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>Studying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No attempt has been made to link participants with the program year. This was done intentionally in order to preserve the students’ anonymity.

To avoid repetition and for reasons of space, we employ nine participants’ feedback and discuss their experiences. We could have included more participants’ comments, however we found a significant amount of duplication. Therefore, out of the 31 interviewees, this paper largely focuses on the anecdotes of nine participants that contributed to the salient points to our discussion surrounding the facilitation of international education. Furthermore, Panel B summarises the demographics of these nine participants. The snap shot of the sample consists of three participants representing the 2010 program, three from the following year, with the remaining from the 2012 program. The participants ranged in age from 20-35. All interviews were held on a one-to-one basis. No reference to their identity is supported in any way; full anonymity is wholly respected and each interview had an average duration of 25 minutes. Several years had passed for some participants since they participated. Nonetheless, we still sought to capture their view within the study to calibrate their long lasting impact/effect on the program. Furthermore, 67% of the interviewees are international students. This is a realistic representation of the current student cohort within Australian universities. As international students are already embedded within a ‘foreign country’ experiencing international education, this study is about how students attending Australian institutions may experience further levels of international education through a carefully designed short-term program in the UK and Europe. As the international cohort is overwhelmingly Asian, a European destination is still deemed to be an international destination for both local and international students.
Data collection and analysis

Following Allen (2009), Kim (2007) and Thorpe (1993), we structured our 31 interviews based on three factors: (i) the preparatory work every student underwent prior to travel; (ii) the three-week program; and (iii) an overview of the participants. The questions and topics we raised with the interviewees are discussed in more detail in the subsequent sub-sections. Each factor sought to establish the impact of the program on the participants’ experiences abroad and their exposure to international education as interpreted by the students themselves. Each participant prior to the interview was allocated with an alphanumeric code (Yr1A, Yr1B etc.), which was then translated to a letter (A, B, C etc.) of our choice. An independent person reviewed the coding of the transcripts to ensure rigorous and accurate analysis.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed and interpreted as a way of making more explicit use of the interviewees’ experiences. In addition, we also gathered a number of the participants’ everyday experiences before, during and after the program including conversations on our dedicated Facebook site. Overall, the interviewees were keen to share their experiences and the semi-structured interview approach facilitated the discussions.

Findings

We categorised students’ experiences based on their pre-academic work, the three-week sojourn and the participants themselves. This approach was chosen as we aimed to investigate the link between program design and international education experiences. Although the three factors are presented separately, they are all inter-related and contribute equally towards achieving high levels of international education via a short-term overseas program.

Preparatory academic work prior to travelling overseas

There is relatively little literature on the link between preparatory academic work and international education. Only recently, Poole and Davis (2006) and Allen (2009) have highlighted the importance of this crucial stage. The academic preparation involved prior to the program allows participants to better understand the environment they will be exposed to during their sojourn. The program requires participants to engage with readings regarding financial markets, international accounting standards and the European regulatory financial framework. The program is structured to grant levels of access to students not normally allowed to private citizens e.g. access to the OECD in Paris and the European Commission in Brussels, thereby providing an intensity leading to high levels of international education.

Initially, most students have their uncertainties about going overseas on the study program. There is the fear of the unknown, the monetary cost and being away from their families. The study program is certainly not a vacation; it involves significant academic preparation and also personal and professional commitment. The interviews raised an interesting feature, with Participants B and I voicing anxieties but also their eagerness to be travelling as a group.

I have never travelled outside Australia and what a wonderful opportunity to be part of a group visiting the main European financial and accounting institutions. I do not think my parents would have approved of such a visit without
going through the itinerary of business visits and its academic content. But yes I was nervous and did not know anyone participating in the program (Participant B).

As an international student I am used to travelling but the attraction of being in a group experiencing a European life-style is what convinced me to ask my Dad to finance my expenses. I convinced my friend to join the program as I did not want to be alone, luckily she was also accepted but I was still worried if I would make new friends. I usually find it hard to make friends whilst on campus (Participant I).

Such feelings of insecurity are obviously a major stumbling block in a student’s endeavour to be internationally educated, and we sought ways to address this issue by organising group briefing sessions, meet-ups and pre-departure barbeques. Our dedicated Facebook site also assisted with students getting to know each other and discussing pre-departure travel tips. Comments/questions on the Facebook site prior to departure included the following:

1) Hi everyone, great to see so many of you join our group so quickly! – 5 degrees Celsius in Paris and -10 in Interlaken. Make sure you pack your thermals, scarf, gloves and warm coat! 2) Are any immunisations required for Europe? 3) Can we include footnotes or does it have to be Harvard referencing for the pre-departure assignment? 4) Does anyone know how to translate German? 90% of the documents I need before we leave are in German? 5) 14 days to go heaps of snow exciting! 6) We will be distributing tickets in 2 weeks’ time. Stay tuned for more announcements on FB. 7) Hey, quick question – when we are visiting the financial institutions, will we be required to wear formal business attire at all times? e.g. suit? Just trying to work out my packing. 8) Do we need to print out the lecture notes before we leave? 9) Can I sit the final exam in Kuala Lumpur when I return or does it have to be Australia? 10) Do we have a spare day in Prato or can we go to Pisa? 11) Hi guys, make sure you keep your receipts in Europe as you can claim them back the VAT tax at the airport. 12) Going to be in Rome the day before everyone arrives. If anyone else is there a day early, please send me a message. 13) If we are required to provide credit card details upon check-in, as a charge against the room, what if we don’t have a credit card? Will this be a problem? 14) With hand-held luggage, are backpacks included as the one item we can carry on board? Because some handbags are bigger than my backpack . . . and they aren’t considered hand-held luggage.

From an academic perspective, we developed group assignments to encourage students to work in groups. We randomly allocated them into groups, which resulted in the benefit of a diverse group based on culture, age, gender and work experience. Their task was to develop an intelligence report on the business organisations we were visiting overseas. The students’ interaction and preparatory work allowed them to become more knowledgeable and also provided an opportunity to practice public speaking. Participant D, a local student who had travelled extensively and was in employment remarked as follows:

The week-long intensive coursework and preparatory research we were instructed to do was not something I looked forward to. Attending Uni during December when most of my mates are out and about was not a pleasant feeling but it became clear as we continued on our business visits how important this phase is. It gives you that
insight into the business visits, their profile and role within the economy (Participant D).

We strongly feel that this is an integral part of the course design for immersing students and working towards achieving high levels of international education. We also allocated 15% of the total assessment criteria to student participation in the intensive preparatory course to encourage student interaction and involvement.

**The three-week program**

It is a fascinating experience to watch participants evolve both socially and culturally throughout the three-week sojourn, as they observe how locals work, commute and live in the main European cities. Comments such as the following were common in the interviews:

*The smells from the open markets, the crowds around you, I think I sensed the experience with all my senses.* (Participant A)

*The first train we boarded from Rome to Milan was the start of a very exciting feeling. The ability to hop onto a train and travel around Europe is something I will never forget.* (Participant G)

*All I can say is that the program left me with an impression that will help me foster a feeling of openness and understanding of how different we are and will keep this in mind whilst at my place of work.* (Participant B)

We notice the students’ attitudes and opinions start to form as we travel from one country to another, visiting banks, regulatory authorities and accounting standard setters, small businesses and universities. Participants observe commonalities and differences across countries and their respective organisations. Everyone is interested to learn more, to better understand the world we live in. The program eventually immerses the participants within the European way of living, encouraging the participants to be more tolerant and accepting of other cultures.

The visits to financial institutions/regulatory authorities and accounting standards setters are the obvious highlight of the program. The insights and viewpoints presented to them by the host speakers of the respective organisations provide an edge to the international education process. The theoretical aspects of the course are learnt by undertaking the required coursework; but the practical insights being spelled out by practitioners and experts in the field is what makes such activities so distinct. The interviewees clearly acknowledge this phenomenon:

*I would have never dreamt to sit in the boardroom of the Swiss National Bank and engage in a conversation with one of the key senior economists to the Swiss government on the forecasted inflation rates and their impact on exchange rates.* (Participant C)

*The European Union structure has always intrigued me and being of Italian origin I have always been curious to learn more. I found the presentation given to us by one of the Commissioners interesting and his perspective on the future of the EU was quite thought provoking.* (Participant F)
As an accounting student, my understanding on the implementation of international accounting standards strengthened as a result of visiting the standards setters in London. Indeed there are numerous benefits for global accounting standards although reality is that diverse standards will continue to exist. (Participant H)

The selection of the business visits is an extremely crucial aspect of the international education process. It is not only about access to the building/infrastructure of the key European organisations, but also about tapping into the host presenter's mind and being able to ask *ad hoc* questions whilst gaining insights to future policies. Of course, the business visits are also selected to fit in with the course curriculum. Numerous preparatory emails would be exchanged between the university and the business organisation to ensure that the organisation was cognisant with the course objectives and background of the students. One of the advantages of a European study program is being exposed to the European institutional framework, with all the organisations, regulatory authorities and other agencies. This is another step towards international education, as one of the realities of living and studying in Australia is the limited exposure to the Euro-debt crisis and the daily events unfolding as a result of the crisis. Throughout the three-week sojourn, students experience first-hand what the Europeans are going through in terms of the financial crisis. As the financial crisis deepens, and governments are attempting to minimise the risk of contagion to other markets, students are becoming more engaged. It is no longer a problem contained within their textbooks. It is a real problem that they read about and listen to on the local media, increasing the intensity of their overseas experience.

Another aspect connected with the course structure and program design is the participants' exposure to non-profit organisations (NPO). We live in a world where NPOs like the OECD in Paris, Bank for International Settlements in Basel Switzerland, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome are structured to help and assist the community at large. With such organisations on our business visit list, it is clear from the interviews that the students find these visits an eye-opening experience:

*I never considered working for NPOs. It simply did not click, but visiting these organisations made me aware of their employment possibilities and the work that I could be possibly doing for society at large.* (Participant E)

*Being a business student we are constantly being reminded of the importance of going concerns and profitable ventures but we never stop and think about social costs and the impact of programs on the wider community. NPOs is something I will keep an eye on in terms of career opportunities.* (Participant H)

The three-week sojourn is only one factor helping the participants achieve their international education experiences. We contend that the combined effect of the three factors facilitate this process, with the following being the last.
The participants

The participants’ heterogeneity causes them to experience different intensities of international education depending on their values. Participants quickly find out that the people around them have different value systems. A female local student with no overseas trip exposure and with working experience revealed the following:

*The program exposes you to a number of places and experiences where you are dealing with strange situations you do not see every day. My current view on multiculturalism and cross-education is now more intense, accepting people for who they are and deal with them accordingly.* (Participant B)

The participants’ language ability affects their level of immersion whilst on the program. Students, conversant in either Italian, French or German, are able to further immerse themselves within the host cultures. Participants often comment that the brief informal one-on-one conversations with small business owners like a local boulangerie in Paris, or an open-air stall owner in Rome empowers them with the ability to use a second language to communicate. Their language ability enables participants to speak to the host people in their own language. Others with no knowledge of a second language may feel frustrated and possibly isolated. Body language generally takes over and becomes a language of communication, with smiles and gestures following. This is often the case when students are communicating individually outside of the group.

Such experiences foster openness, with the participants noticing commonality within a multicultural context. The awareness of different cultures increases as the program progresses. Well-travelled participants are less susceptible to such notions as their experience takes over. Participants connect their travel to the international education process, whilst submerged in the European experience, sensing commonality and uniqueness. The ability to move easily from one country to another and compare experiences or perceptions is one of the advantages of such study programs. Some participants are frustrated because of the short time they spend in each of the European counties and express a strong desire to stay longer. Such are the challenges involved with short-term sojourns; hence, the program design and sequence of business visits is crucial. The more mature participants like Participant E (a female international student with extensive experience of overseas trips) openly acknowledged the program’s benefits, as is documented in our interviews:

*As a result of the business visits, my feelings and attitudes increased as I travelled. My knowledge base increased and as a result I feel more confident talking about the financial crisis and the general economy. It is an attitude I take with me at work. Global education is not only about theory but about attitudes you develop through your experiences.* (Participant E)

The issue of gender imbalance in terms of job opportunities is a common topic that arises amongst the participants whilst on the program. When visiting organisations and institutions, participants realise that females are occupying key positions within the executive hierarchy:

*The host presenters at Banca Intesa in Milan and at the European Commission in Brussels were both women. This inspires me as a female as very often we are led*
to believe that there are limits as to how high a female may climb the corporate ladder. What is not clear though is what type of work-life balance these people have. (Participant D)

In my culture back in Vietnam, women seem to be given less opportunities. It is nice to see women being given the opportunity in these organisations. (Participant G)

These experiences whilst on the study program generally provide life-long memories. Students are glad to describe what they did whilst being in Europe and how it affected their attitudes:

The program gave me confidence and credibility. I now feel more assertive and I returned home with a new understanding about the global economy. My focus is more intensified and it made a difference in my personality. (Participant C)

My overriding comment is that I learnt more about Australia travelling to other countries than I would in any other place. We take everything for granted here (i.e., in Australia) what we saw and experienced opened my eyes. (Participant B)

Overall, travel is a way to learn about global perspectives. It is a self-learning process, irrespective of whether you are a local or international student, as students constantly compare what they see with their own practices. They learn more about their own country whilst travelling and any exposure to other cultures is going to increase one's tolerance, irrespective whether they agree or disagree with what they see. One aspect of the study program that consistently occurs is its ability to bring participants together, sharing their experiences and viewpoints on several issues even if unrelated to the study program. These same students generally would not engage on-campus as they did on the program. The objective of bringing people together to talk to each other, and as a result be more tolerant of each other, is therefore achieved.

Discussion and conclusion

Internationalising the curriculum, is a necessary component towards the preparation of graduates that possess a broad range of skills in preparation for today’s workforce (OECD. 2012; ABDC, 2012; the International Association of Universities, 1998; Universities Australia, 1998). Students also appreciate cross-cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication skills as essential skills for graduates (Kavanagh & Drennan 2008). The process of internationalising the curriculum can include activities such as curriculum innovation, study abroad programs and student exchange programs. This study explores students’ experiences regarding international education after participating in a short-term international study program. We also evaluate how the program design may affect their immersion in such a program.

In terms of program design, we find that preparatory meetings and course work, the business visit selection, and the quality of host speakers has a significant effect on students’ international awareness. The importance of preparatory meetings and course work has already been established in the literature (Allen, 2009; Poole & Davis 2006). Regarding student experiences, we find that the magnitude of changes the participants experienced depended on their international, global and intercultural perspectives. Participants that
identified themselves as significantly different to the host culture generally experienced a high degree of psychological intensity (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Significant differences in terms of beliefs, attitudes and communication styles contributed towards increased intercultural immersion.

A common trend throughout the interviews was that participants who shared common physical traits with the host people had an increased sense of acceptance. The identification and association with a certain racial or ethnic background provided our participants with an increased sense of belonging to the host culture. In contrast, individual participants who did not experience this similarity tried to understand how it related to their own culture.

The program design provided a mixed bag of immersion experiences. The lack of any European host language obviously prevented some cross-cultural interactions. However, the program does allow participants to experience an increase in immersion in the host culture during their free time from the program activities (Hackey, Boggs, & Borozan, 2012). Cultural immersion does have significant benefits including a life-long value of cultural differences. An understanding of these differences can be a distinguishing characteristic of successful graduates (Porth, 1997).

Overall, the program design grants our participants’ access to a number of keynote speakers that are experts in their field. This international exposure to leaders in their respective disciplines allows the participants to gain accurate and updated information. We also argue that unfortunately the prearranged program design of planned accommodations, whilst convenient for the participants, limits the immersion experience. However, for the well-travelled participants, the combination of the business visits and the main European landmarks are an excellent opportunity to immerse themselves within the European way of living.

On a gender issue, we noted that female participants in the program found an increased awareness of women's capability within the workforce. On several occasions throughout the business visits, the host speakers are females occupying senior executive roles within the organisations. This came as a surprise to some participants, and possibly served as a source of inspiration for them to achieve similar positions in their own countries.

We argue that there are a number of challenges ahead for Australian universities in developing short-term study programs. Tertiary education is currently our main service export and Australia continues to be one of the main education providers within the Asia-Pacific region (Gallagher & Garrett, 2012). Universities have a moral and ethical obligation to deliver high-quality programs to both local and international students (De Wit, 1993). One of the main issues relates to the choice of geographic location to host the study tour. Further research is required to identify which region or combination of regions delivers the deepest immersion for fostering international education. There are financial constraints in developing such programs, and the overseas study program costs are an additional cost to the participants besides the normal course fees. As different universities have different priorities, their overseas study programs should reflect their values and principles. Australian universities have established offshore campuses and twinning arrangements with overseas partners in an effort to internationalise their teaching curriculum. Amidst all the complex issues Australian universities face in implementing an international agenda, they remain strongly committed to this phenomenon. Irrespective of any approach put forward, an overseas study program will always deliver a degree of international education to all the participants involved.

References


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