

Study Abroad - Opportunities for Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

A convenience sample survey of 188 under/ postgraduate students in an Australian university showed a favourable attitude towards study abroad programs that enable students to mix with people from different cultures. Forty-two per cent of the surveyed students reported having been involved in study abroad programs whilst 58% did not have prior experience. Participants who were involved in such programs in the past viewed study abroad programs as less stressful or an important part of university study, whereas those participants with no prior involvement in the program consider it as an opportunity to learn about other cultures. Participants were more likely to be older, postgraduate, or overseas students. **Keywords:** Study abroad program, perceptions, higher education students, cultures, Australia

Introduction

Very limited studies have to date been conducted on aspects of study abroad programs. Neppel (2005) and Armfield (2004) have observed that for so long only the privileged class could travel overseas for educational purposes, this changed after the world wars. Anderson et al. (2005) examine the development of cross-cultural sensitivity during short-term study abroad tour, and report that short-term, non-language-based study abroad programs can have a positive impact on the students' cultural sensitivity, and travel experience may enhance students' interest in cultural diversity (Goldstein and Kim 2006, p. 511). Smith and Jenner (1997, p. 63) reiterate that travel is increasingly part of the curriculum. Stewart and Dedee (2003) reiterate that the strongest affect of study abroad programs relate to aspects of knowledge of international and trans-cultural issues. The study indicates that female students exhibited greater language interest, lower ethnocentrism, lower intercultural communication apprehension and prejudice than their male counterparts (Kim and Goldstein, 2005). According to Kitsantas (2004), study abroad programs enhance students' understanding of cross-cultural and global issues, emotional resilience, openness and flexibility, perceptual acuity and personal autonomy. Armfield (2004) and Wortman (2002) report that significant gains were noted after students participated in the study abroad program, showing a significant increase in the level of intercultural sensitivity. Neppel (2005) concludes that students who went on long-term study abroad programs showed higher level of improvements in cognitive complexity, liberal learning, personal philosophy and interpersonal confidence than students who participated in short-term study abroad program. Anderson et al. (2006 p. 467) report that programs that put students in face-to-face contact with people of different cultures would seem to have the greatest likelihood of producing positive outcomes.

Purpose and Method of the Study

Given the limited studies that addressed the link between study abroad programs and students' exposure to diverse culture, hence playing a catalyst for educational tourism, this current investigation aimed at gauging university students' views about study abroad

programs. Relevant questions containing nine statements were adapted from Goldstein and Kim (2006), Wortman (2002) and Pascarella et al. (1996). Nine statements made part one of the questionnaires whilst part two sought socio-demographic information including gender, age, level of study, birth and residential countries, and whether they took part in study abroad programs.

Results and Discussions

Of the 188 respondents, the majority were females (58%), undergraduates (59%), Australian residents (37%), and with mean age of 23.3 years. Forty-two per cent had participated in study abroad program (Table 1).

Table 1: Socio-demographic Profiles of Respondents (N=188)

Demographics characteristics	Categories	Per cent
<i>Gender</i>	Male	42.0
	Female	58.0
<i>Age group</i>	22 years or younger	50.0
	23 years or older	50.0
<i>Level of study</i>	Undergraduate	59.0
	Postgraduate	41.0
<i>Usual residence</i>	Australia	36.7
	Overseas	63.3
<i>Study abroad participation</i>	Yes	41.5
	No	58.5

Views of Study Abroad Programs

Overall, participants viewed study abroad programs as opportunities to learn about other cultures, meet interesting people, learn/speak languages, or gain enjoyable experience. They also considered study abroad would develop their academic skills, build self-confidence or assess their inner self (understanding ones own values) Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' Views of Study Abroad Programs

Study abroad programs ...	Mean*	S.D.
...would be interesting to learn about other cultures	6.08	1.03
...would help me meet interesting people	5.86	1.86
...would enhance my ability to speak a foreign language	5.76	1.28
...would enhance my ability to cope with people from other cultures	5.82	1.08
...would be enjoyable experience	5.61	1.93
...would enjoy discussions with people of different values	5.56	1.29
...would help me understand myself and my values better	5.55	1.13
...would build my self confidence	5.43	1.17
...studying abroad is an important part of university study	5.09	1.41

* Scale rating: 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree.

Groups Compared

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare group differences over the statements. Age, usual residence, and past participation showed statistically significant differences. Younger respondents were of the view that study tours would give them the opportunities to meet interesting people and would enjoy the experience. Respondents that came from other countries would perceive study abroad as an integral part of university education, so do students who did not participate in study abroad program. This latter group also consider that study abroad programs would give them an opportunity to learn about other cultures (Table 3).

Table 3: Mean Differences

Study abroad programs would ...	Groups		<i>t</i> -value
	<u>22 years</u>	<u>23 years</u>	
<i>Age:</i>			
...help me meet interesting people	6.0	5.7	2.18 *
...be enjoyable experience	5.8	5.4	2.01 *

<i>Residence:</i>			
...be an important part of university study	<u>Australia</u> 4.4	<u>Overseas</u> 5.3	-3.87 **

<i>Participation in the past:</i>			
...be interesting to learn about other cultures	<u>Yes</u> 5.9	<u>NO</u> 6.2	-2.09 *
...be an important part of university study	5.5	4.8	3.52 **

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Correlations Statistics

The author investigated relationship between the nine statements and demographic variables with significant differences on some of these statements using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (*r*). Preliminary assessment of assumptions showed no violation of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. Overall, there were positive correlations between most of the statements. The strength of the correlations range from small ($r = .15$ to $.29$) to medium ($r = .33$ to $.47$). There were no significant correlations between important part of university study on one hand and meeting interesting people or learning about other cultures.

In additions, there was no significant correlation between learning to speak a foreign language and study abroad being a part of university study (Table 4).

Table 3: Correlations between Statements

Statements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self confidence								
2. Meet interesting people	.42**							
3. Enjoyable	.25**	.40**						
4. Learn about other cultures	.36**	.47**	.23**					
5. Discussing different cultures	.22**	.27**	.29**	.33**				
6. Part of university study	.21**	.10	.26**	.08	.20**			
7. Understand self and values	.25**	.26**	.22**	.37**	.45**	.22**		
8. Speak a foreign language	.13	.20**	.15*	.28**	.16*	.08	.33**	
9. Cope with different cultures	.21**	.29**	.22**	.35**	.10	.22**	.46**	.45**

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Conclusion

This exploratory study was conducted to gauge the views of university students about study abroad programs. Results, consistent with previous studies, indicated that overall, study abroad programs give students opportunities to learn about other cultures, people and foreign languages while at the same time being enjoyable experiences. Results also indicated that group differences were evident in age, residence, level of study and place of birth on some statements. Socialisation and adaptation were aspects of study abroad programs that would significantly contribute to the tourism sector. Participation on study abroad programs would more likely associate to age (older age group), level of study (postgraduate), usual residence (overseas), and place of birth (overseas). This implies that in order for international offices of the universities to involve students in study abroad programs, focus would be given to these demographic groups. As Carr (2003 p. 191) discusses institutions of higher learning play a vital role in facilitating individual student's international mobility through inter-institutional and / or intergovernmental agreements and /or governmental programs. The discussions in the preceding pages highlight some aspects of study abroad programs that students view as appealing. However, this caution be taken when using the results since it was based on a small group selected based on convenience in a single university campus. Hence, with this exploratory examination as stepping stone, an interest would hopefully be created for further research with large sample size in more than one location would be a logical extension.

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