EDUCATING STUDENTS ON A GLOBAL SCALE.
STUDY TOURS IN DESIGN AND THE IMPACT ON GRADUATES.

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ABSTRACT
This paper will discuss the importance of international study tour programs for undergraduate students studying design disciplines in Australia. To date, there has been no study on the effectiveness of these particular study tours and the impact on graduates. Design is a global occupation and to be competitive, designers must understand and appreciate their industry on a global scale. Australia is geographically isolated making it difficult for undergraduate students to appreciate and learn from design activities from around the world. While there is every intention by lecturers to educate students on global activities, it simply cannot compare to students studying while immersed in a different culture. A study tour offers Australian students the opportunity to collaborate with an international cohort on projects that were perhaps never thought of at their home university, as well as opening their eyes to the global world of design.

Keywords: Study tour, Design, Internationalisation.

INTRODUCTION
For the past seven years Swinburne University of Technology, Faculty of Design, have been conducting short-term study tours to Europe for industrial design and product design engineering undergraduate students. To date, there has been no work done to evaluate the importance/impact these study tours have on the participant from an Australian perspective. This paper uses individual student experiences to evaluate the learning practice from recent study tour participants to Germany and Switzerland in 2010. Survey responses from this group provide data that is used to quantify the value study tours can have on undergraduate design students. This data, along with examples of the student project outcomes and direct quotes from the German university staff involved in this international collaboration, reinforce the referenced data that highlights the value of internationalisation of the curriculum. This research acknowledges work done by Sanders and Ward (1970), Goodwin and Nacht (1988), Opper (1990) and Hutchins (1996), which all reinforce the importance of broadening student experience through their total immersion in another culture, regardless of the duration.

For most Australian universities, internationalisation is a key component to their overall strategy. However, internationalisation is largely misunderstood because the concept is closely aligned to the success of recruiting international students. International students studying higher education in Australia has grown from 25,000 in 1990 to almost 295,000 in 2008 (DEEWR, 2008). This coincides with increased global mobility of students from 0.6 million in 1975 to over 3.3 million in 2008 (OECD, 2010). Within a relatively short period of time, internationalisation has gone from being a marginal, value-add benefit to a core focus for higher education. Australia has the highest percentage of international students compared to domestic students than anywhere else in the world at 29 per cent. Consequently, internationalisation is seen largely for its economic benefits rather than its cultural ones (Harris, 2008).

Within the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology, thirty per cent of students are international, representing over 35 different countries. While such diversity brings many cultural and educational benefits to an Australian classroom, the faculty’s strategy for internationalisation is much
broader than incoming international students. It covers five broad areas:

- Recruitment of international students
- Internationalisation of the curriculum
- Outward bound study abroad for students
- Transnational education and collaborative partnerships
- Internationalisation of staff

For the Faculty of Design, internationalisation is a response to the globalisation of the profession and the need for graduates to be ‘global citizens’. While global citizenship remains a contested concept (Streitwieser & Light, 2010), the faculty recognises the need for design graduates to have a range of skills that enable them to operate in a global industry. These include: inter-cultural awareness and sensitivity, inter-cultural communication skills, the understanding of interconnectedness and the power of global networks, and the need to design with wide-reaching economic, social and cultural responsibilities. The Faculty broadly adopts Jane Knight’s well-cited definition of internationalisation, “The process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2).

A key component to this strategy is the internationalisation of the curriculum. This includes formal curriculum and informal curriculum, which both have a role to play in the intercultural literacy of students (Leask, 2009). The formal curriculum represents not only content but also programs that enable students to interact and engage with other cultures. While the fact of hosting a large and diverse number of international students within Australia would suggest high levels of intercultural literacy, the evidence is contradictory (Robertson, et al., 2000). International students and domestic Australian students do not integrate and engage very well (Arkoudis, et al., 2010).

In 2004, the Faculty initiated a program to expand opportunities to spend time overseas as part of their study. While exchange programs were available, the number of students leaving Australia was relatively small. In 2004, 15 design students spent part of their studies overseas, compared with 61 students in 2010. Today, outward-bound study abroad is considered a key performance indicator in the faculty and university strategy for internationalisation.

Swinburne University of Technology aims to increase outward-bound study abroad from 465 students in 2009 to 750 by 2015. In 2009, 18.8 per cent of all Australian undergraduate students who completed a design program at Swinburne have had an international experience during their studies. This compares with the university-wide percentage of 10.8 and the national average at undergraduate level of 8.8 per cent (Connolly, 2010).

Since 2004, the expansion of study abroad within the Faculty of Design has largely been driven by the number and quality of student exchange partners, the promotion of how study abroad benefit students when they return to Australia and the expansion of study tours. Study tours typically involve a member of staff taking approximately 12 students for a period of three or six weeks. Students normally receive credits for a study tour where a three-week experience is equivalent to one subject in their curriculum (out of 24 subjects in a three-year degree). Study tours typically take place during the semester breaks during July and January and therefore do not hinder their regular study. Within Australia, short-term study abroad has grown rapidly in the last few years, which follows a similar trend to study abroad in the USA. Between 2007 and 2009 the proportion of students in Swinburne University taking short-term study programs increased from 40.8 per cent to 51.3 per cent. This compares with the national average of 29.5 per cent in 2009. However, this lags behind US study abroad which indicates that in 2008/9, 54.6 per cent of study abroad students undertook a short-term program (IIE, 2010).

STUDY TOUR

The most recent study tour that is used as a case study in this paper consisted of a group of industrial design and product design engineering undergraduate students from Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. The study tour was a mix of cultural experiences and relevant industry visits throughout Germany and Switzerland for a duration of three weeks, supported by an international collaboration project hosted by Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weiβensee (KH-Berlin University). This project
was fundamentally important to increase the learning experience on an international platform and was positively reflected in the student surveys that are used to support this paper. The project pushed the Australian students to think about design on a global scale. The project brief was to design a bus shelter in the form/style of an influential German designer they were assigned. This brief was delivered in Australia and the students had to research their given designer, as well as existing bus shelter designs before departure. This initiated the design process and helped each student better understand the country they were about to travel to.

The study tour collaboration between Swinburne University and KH-Berlin University was made possible under the guidance of Professor Hartmut Ginnow-Merkert from KH-Berlin University. While in Germany and studying at KH-Berlin the group used their research to begin the concept development phase. Concepts were generated under the leadership of German industrial designer and lecturer, Mr. Andre Witting. Mr. Witting initiated a brainstorming exercise that forced the Australian students to think about considerations that would never be thought about while designing in Australia, such as snow, different human behaviours and appropriate manufacturing technologies for German conditions. This deeper and different level of thought required to maximise each design outcome was a valuable learning experience and was one of the most obvious differences between a student studying in Australia and one studying in Germany. Personal correspondence from Mr. Witting states: “I must admit that first I was a little bit skeptical when I was sent the project brief the students were to work on during their time at Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee. Using iconic German designers as a guide for designing new bus shelters did not fit so well in the way of design teaching I knew so far. As the project started it turns out that the theme was just right for the students and their understanding of German design. Using the public transport in Berlin, they could do a lot of ethnographical research on the way. And with their research on their given designer, each student already had good background information on German design history.”

Concepts for this project were completed at KH-Berlin University and presented to the local German students for discussion. This interaction and engagement with German students was a valuable insight into the thoughts and beliefs of the type of people who would typically interact with these particular designs. The Australian students were inundated with new knowledge and presented with thoughts and considerations they were unaware of. This useful mix of student conversations changed the directions of certain designs to make them more appropriate and appealing to the German public and to German conditions. The level of interaction was invaluable for the Australian students as they were able to refine their designs according to the beliefs and knowledgeable advice from the German students. This level of detailed refinement would not have been possible for an Australian student to do in their home institution by simply referring to the Internet or published material on German design.

Rodriguez (2000) states that some programs define cultural immersion as simply “being there”, asserting that physically studying in another country is an immersion in itself and that knowledge of another culture and language will follow naturally. This validates the claims made about the importance of incorporating project-based learning into the study tour program, rather than just a cultural tour of typical tourist sites. The elusive perspective shift that comes from a deeper, more critical cultural immersion experience includes empathy (Rodriguez, 2000). The ability to see things from another point of view and evaluate situations not as Australian
students, but as local community members helps contextualise design to provide more suitable outcomes.
The project outcome also included critical reflection – an awareness of how one is informed by one’s own culture and makes sense of cultural differences subjectively. These skills, difficult to define and qualify, are becoming more important as students look for design jobs in the global marketplace.

On completion of the concept generation phase at KH-Berlin University the Australia students were required to refine their concepts to consider suggestions made by German students and teaching staff. This refinement ultimately led to their final design outcome which was rapid prototyped upon return to Australia. These scale models, along with a poster and reflective journal of their experience, were exhibited to promote the creative work that took place on the study tour. Without intending this, the exhibition of the returning student work was a very good promotional tool used to influence current Australian design students to sign-up for the next study tour. This growing participation in study tours will ensure continued research in this area and a similar successful model will be used and built upon to continue this understanding of the value international study tours have on Australian design students.

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**STUDENT SURVEY**

To gain a greater understanding of the importance/value of the recent study tour a survey was given out to all students involved. Burn et al., (1990) suggest that the comparative success or failure of a study tour abroad program cannot be adequately assessed without referring first and foremost to its effects (in the short, medium and longer term) on participating students. This survey helps understand the importance of the study tour program in the short-term and further research is anticipated to understand the success/failure in the medium and longer term. Questions given to the participating students were created to assess the short-term effects of the study tour and a summary of responses follows:

1. When asked how did the study tour impact on the student’s academic work, all participants said it positively impacted on their work. The most promising responses that validate this claim are as follows:
   - The study tour rekindled my interest in my course... Listening to the German lecturer talk about design was interesting and his ideas and insights intriguing. I am now looking forward to finishing my degree.
   - Studying design abroad motivated me to work harder and to practice design outside of my university schedule since I saw the bigger picture of just how many designers there are in another country. The study tour also opened my eyes to designing for the world and not just for Australia.
   - It was a massive eye opener to do a project on the other side of the world where design is a much more recognised language. It has allowed me to approach university work with a fluent understanding as I have seen different perspectives of how the job can be undertaken.

2. The second question was put in place to provide preliminary quantitative data and was as follows:
What was the most useful aspect of your study tour?
- Opportunity to do an international project
- Experience another culture
- Getting to meet new people who share the same interests
• All of the above
80 per cent of responses selected ‘All of the above’, while 20 per cent selected ‘Opportunity to do an international project’. This shows that 100 per cent of participants valued the experience of working alongside German students to complete a design project — further reinforcing the opportunities these students were given that would not be possible while studying purely in Australia.

3. Question three was put in place to gauge whether the study tour changed the student’s approach to the design process. All students answered ‘yes’ and the most promising responses are as follows:
• Having sat through presentations and also having presented our work to the students at KH-Berlin University I have realised that, as designers, we shouldn’t just aim to put a product on the shelves, a more human-centered approach is needed and all ‘new’ designs and products should be benefiting society in some way.
• The emphasis on the target demographic and how they think and react is extremely important in the design process. Listening to Professor Ginnow-Merkert talk about design was the most useful aspect of the study tour.
• I no longer design based on ‘home’ being Australia. There are so many other aspects that influence design in every other country. An obvious example is the weather conditions or the general culture of the people living within that particular country. Studying abroad has driven me to do adequate research based on the target audience, target country, and target culture to find what is acceptable design and what will fulfill the client’s constraints and restrictions.

4. The forth question asked whether the study tour improved the way in which the student works. All responses again answered ‘yes’ with particular focus on increased work ethic. The most notable comments are as follows:
• The drive to achieve more has increased.
• It improved the professionalism of my work.
• Travelling and living with other design students pushed me to be better and to create stronger designs. It wasn’t a typical competition but it drove me to try to be better than my colleagues both abroad and at home.

5. A lot of successful designers are passionate about their profession which led to the question being asked about the influence of the study tour and did the student’s experience make them more passionate about their course. This was a mixed response as some student’s were already very passionate about their course and while learning a lot from their study tour experience; it didn’t necessarily increase their passion. There were a few noteworthy responses that are as follows:
• Design is such a broad topic that only knowing more can help you be a better designer, as you can cater your design to specific needs dependant on the cultural relevance.
• Experiencing design from another culture was both shocking and amazing. I have always loved design but until I witnessed it firsthand in another country I didn’t realise just how good industrial design is and how it impacts on everything in any country. Seeing how other students from the other side of the world work makes me want to do better.

6. Specific to design the student group was asked to respond to what they saw as the major differences between Australia and Germany. There was a general consensus that Australian design lacks history and is somewhat undervalued. The most interesting responses are as follows:
• Germany loves design and really uses it to impact the communication of the object being designed. In Australia we take design for granted without knowing its true potential (along with the designers role/job).
• Design is more recognised as a career in Europe and is more respected as a profession. In Australia, design is looked upon as more of an ‘artsy’ field and people don’t value the processes and merit that design can bring to a product.
• A sense that design in Germany is more valued than in Australia... The major difference is the standards. They (German students) have much higher entrance level skills which produce higher standards of work.
7. The final question in this survey asked how the student thinks the study tour will impact their career. All students believed that the study tour would greatly impact their career as they have a better appreciation for their chosen profession from an international perspective. It was interesting to note that most students mentioned the fact that their international experience will help separate them from other graduates competing for the same jobs. A selection of responses for this final question are as follow:

• I believe it will help me separate myself from my peers and give me a better opportunity to gain employment.
• It will show I have international relevance which is broader than a non-travelling student.
• The study tour will have a huge impact on my design career. It has already changed the way I think of design in so many aspects relating to culture, different countries and what is acceptable depending on the target audience. It has given me a broader view of design in terms of the global market rather that just in Australia. I also believe the study tour has given me a huge advantage in my favour when applying for a job against ‘x’ amount of applicants because I have not only seen a global perspective, I have designed for it.

Although this survey was preliminary and only distributed to the most recent study tour participants, it works well to initiate research findings that will continue to evolve and help reshape the way in which study tours are conducted. The findings in this initial phase all suggest that the student experience was positive in showing that their participation on a study tour has helped them better understand and appreciate the importance of design activity on a global scale. Design should always learn from and take influences from best practice around the world; to help ensure that what is designed will contribute to socially responsible and/or environmentally responsible outcomes of relevance. To further add value to this paper, the two staff that were instrumental in setting up this project from KH-Berlin University were asked to provide feedback on the study tour collaboration.

Mr. Andre Witting was a product of exchange himself and was very happy to work with the Australian students as he sees the clear benefits of these cooperation’s. During his studies of Product Design in Berlin, he had the opportunity to spend two semesters in different universities abroad. One in Lahti, Finland and one in the Design Centre of Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. When asked his thoughts about the importance of education abroad he describes it as learning a lot about the countries you are in, their cultures and different attitudes towards design, as well as meeting great people from around the world who share the same passions. Correspondence from Mr. Witting states, “Through my own personal experience I know about the positive side effects of spending time studying in another country. Leaving a familiar environment can help find new perspectives and new ideas. The benefits of spending time studying abroad are not easy to put into words, but in the ongoing globalisation it becomes more and more important (especially for a designer) to personally experience different cultures and to get into contact with designers from other countries.”

Professor Ginnow-Merkert is an experienced product design lecturer with particular emphasis on experimental design. He has a deep philosophical understanding on internationalisation of design and via correspondence he explained a different approach to analysing the international partnership between universities.

“I prefer to have academic exchanges with universities or design schools abroad that help us to broaden our horizons. Usually, I look for partnerships and cooperations in places that have something to offer that we cannot have access to locally or culturally.”

Because of this, Professor Ginnow-Merkert cooperates with entities in developing countries (Bangladesh, Cuba, Colombia, Guatemala), as he wants his students to see and feel the problems of the so-called “Third World”. He cooperates with China and Taiwan, because he feels they need access to Chinese culture topics. India, because it will be the next economic superpower, with a tremendous potential of cultural wealth. Japan, because they have defined design philosophies way beyond the
Bauhaus and Ulm that have the potential to lead design into the next era. The USA, because it’s the one place where Industrial Design professionalism has been carried to an extreme. The connection between Swinburne University and KH-Berlin University has been based on the good mutual understanding and the long-term cooperation together. Professor Ginnow-Merkert states, “We are at a time however, where just good (Western) design would not be enough to grow this collaboration. It would be quite interesting for us to have access to the Australian Aboriginal culture, belief systems and philosophy, or such. Just as we study Asian cultures through our partnerships in Korea, Taiwan, and China, I feel we could learn a lot through our honest and respectful cooperation with indigeneous people. They have so much to give us, and we would be so stupid to ignore their treasure of wisdom, especially in our era of uncontrolled pollution, nuclear catastrophes, and climate change.” This level of thought and consideration underpins the value of cooperating with someone who thinks differently about design. While this notion of cooperating with underdeveloped countries or entities to ensure Australian students consider/develop socially and/or environmentally responsible outcomes does currently exist, it has provided a clear understanding of how study tour project content can be re-developed to not only benefit the student’s cultural awareness, but also benefit their social awareness. Professor Ginnow-Merkert has raised a very useful point about the content and the learning experience of the tour. Not only should it benefit the tour participants, however, it should aim to benefit everyone involved. This sensible move forward is not underestimating the recent bus shelter project the returning study tour students completed, as being important cultural awareness adding value to the student learning experience. However, for future tours, a design project that would add value to both the students and the partner universities involved – through cultural awareness, responsible design and most importantly, relevant design – would be a sensible move forward to ensure the student learning experience is appropriate. Study tours in the past have developed relevant content for the participants to be better culturally aware, which is evident in the survey responses. However, the ongoing success of these study tours should be maximised by creating content that will not only be relevant to the individual, but relevant to everyone involved.

CONCLUSION

While internationalisation in higher education has been assumed to be a positive phenomenon, the reality is that the benefits and outcomes of internationalisation on students or institutions are not clear or explicit (Cuthbert, et al., 2008). There are a number of studies that specifically look at the benefits and outcomes of study abroad on students, and they specifically look at their impact on careers, cross-cultural engagement, communication and awareness (Hutchings, et al., 2002; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002; Kuh & Kauffman, 1984). However, the majority of this research tends to focus on semester-long exchange. There is limited research focused on the benefits and outcomes for students of short-term study abroad programs, especially study tours. There is little evidence to suggest that short-term study abroad programs provide any less meaningful long-term benefits to students. The immediate outcomes between short and long-term programs would suggest that the longer the duration the study abroad experience, the greater the benefits (Dwyer, 2004). However, in terms of the longer term benefits, the distinction between short-term and long-term study abroad programs are negligible (Fischer, 2009). Both types of study abroad programs have a transformative effect on students, increase inter-cultural awareness and provide greater career possibilities.

In the context of design education, very few studies have looked at the benefits or outcomes of study abroad. Design is a global industry and designer’s work with clients, suppliers and manufactures from all over the world. The end users of their products and services are often in another country. Thus, the ability for design students to integrate cultural understanding and empathy through design projects is an important graduate attribute. It is a suitable response to suggest that study tours, regardless of the duration, add value to a student’s learning experience. There is however, opportunity to expand these study tours to include socially responsible outcomes that could benefit
developing/underdeveloped nations. This would form an advanced structure for future tours that would not only give international experience to the student cohort, but will educate them on the global issues that a designer may help resolve in their future career.

The impact of the academic requirements in relation to the individual’s personal development aims to change the way a participant views the world. An increase in knowledge, reflection and action creates the opportunity for the participant to increase their international perspectives, global perspectives and intercultural perspectives. Rather than simply create a cultural study tour of museums, monuments and stereotypical “tourist” attractions, this study tour provides academic rigor to show global relevance for the students involved and to imply that design graduates need to be socially and culturally responsible designers.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Mr. Lucas Chan
Professor Hartmut Ginnow-Merkert
Mrs. Kendrea Kneeshaw
Mr. Nathan Kotlarewski
Mr. Graeme Marshall
Mr. Daniel Naturani
Mr. Shane Petrie
Mr. Jaron Tofful
Mr. Joshua White
Mr. Andre Witting