An international business study tour:  
A student perspective

Debbi Weaver  
Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia  
dweaver@swin.edu.au

Mark Tucker  
Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia  
mtucker@swin.edu.au

Students with international study exposure appeal to organisations seeking employees with broader perspectives. As a result many universities seek to provide opportunities for students to differentiate themselves in this respect. An International Study Tour to Asia has been successfully operating at Swinburne University of Technology for a number of years, and anecdotal information from both the students and staff accompanying the tour is that it has been successful in exposing students to international business and different cultures, albeit at the cost of high levels of stress for some students. During 2008, a research project was initiated, where past students were interviewed to ascertain their perspectives of the professional and personal impact on them from participating in the study tour. This paper reports on the outcomes from interviews with the 2008 students. While all students felt they benefited professionally from participation in the tour, students were polarised about the level of individual scaffolding required. Students who had had no prior experience of other cultures or of international travel experienced severe culture shock and unexpectedly high levels of homesickness, indicating that these students may require additional personal support both prior to and during the tour.

Keywords: study tour, student experience

Introduction

The aftermath of the global financial crisis has transformed workplaces and altered the career paths for both new entrants and established workers. Institutes of higher education need to prepare business students entering this new environment. The challenge for business educators is to develop programs that best equip students to enter the international business environment with practical experience, enabling them to be effective employees immediately. In response to the changing needs of international business, educators have developed various educational programs, such as study tours, which reflect the principles of experiential learning. A study tour is an ideal vehicle for blending concepts and material discussed in the classroom with the real-world business environment. The educational merits of a study tour can be applied to a wide variety of university disciplines, including agriculture (Bruening et al., 2002), business (Hutchings et al., 2002, Sachau et al., 2009), counselling (Jurgen & McAuliff, 2004), and management information systems (Rollier, 2001). One such program developed at Swinburne University of Technology has been an International Study Tour that exposes students to a variety of global organisations operating in two Asian countries.
This paper describes the evaluation of a multidisciplinary study tour, which aims to help students develop a global perspective in business, to appreciate different cultural nuances, and to challenge their personal capabilities.

**Experiential learning and international business programs**

For decades, both educators and students have been aware of the important role played by experience in an individual’s learning process (Cantor, 1997; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In today’s competitive employment markets, the successful business student must not only excel in their chosen discipline (whether this is marketing, accounting, management or another area), but must also appreciate how their specific field of study is applicable in the global economy. Experiential learning provides a useful way to further this understanding, by providing a rich and active real-world learning environment, to help improve student engagement and learning outcomes:

Challenging and supportive learning environments and environments that support students; participation in enriching experiences play an important role in enhancing satisfaction and student outcomes (AUSSE, 2008b, p. 1).

**International Business Study Tour Program**

The Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale, of Swinburne University of Technology has adopted a multidisciplinary focus for its International Business Study Tour Program, which was established in 2000. As a result, the study tour provides an opportunity for students to:

- better understand their own discipline area of study in a global environment;
- develop a deeper understanding of the issues facing those in other discipline areas; and
- reflect on and develop their prior experiences (both professional and personal).

The study tour program is offered each year to undergraduate students who have completed two years of their degree. While many of the students undertaking the tour are business students, those from other disciplines (for example, the social sciences) are encouraged to participate. The program is multidisciplinary, bringing together elements of culture, economics, finance, sociology, marketing and human resource management. Key learning objectives of the tour include students developing strong cross-cultural communication skills, an ability to appreciate social and cultural differences, and a higher level of confidence in themselves as potential global citizens. It is hoped that these objectives will improve the students’ success in identifying new employment opportunities, in enhancing their current career path, and in becoming effective members of the global community.

Students are exposed to the various social and cultural nuances in the countries they visit, helping them develop the necessary personal skills required to actively participate in the business world as global citizens. Furthermore, following their experience, these students have the ability to better understand cross-cultural issues and appreciate diversity at home and abroad (Hutchings et al., 2002).

The program consists of two equally important components. The first of these is undertaken on campus and involves a coursework element and a pre-departure series of seminars. The coursework provides students with an integrated overview of a company’s operations, particularly those aspects impacted by operating overseas (including the impact of cultural and ethical issues on business fundamentals, business strategy and structure, marketing, and
human resource management). This component, based on the textbook, is completed by students individually.

Prior to departure, students and staff meet as a group for two days. During this time, ticketing and accommodation, personal health, guidelines for working in teams, and the cultural nuances of each country being visited are discussed.

The second component is an overseas trip of approximately two weeks in duration to two major cities in different countries in South-East Asia. In each country, students visit a range of companies operating in different fields (for example, law, government, manufacturing, service, banking and construction). The different countries for each trip are chosen to provide students with a clear contrast in business practices – for example, a free-market driven economy (Singapore), and a command-based economy (Vietnam). Students generally visit around six companies in each country, with each visit lasting two to three hours.

The business visits provide a context for real-world pedagogy, allowing students to directly see and question what they have previously read in textbooks and/or discussed in class, prior to travelling overseas. This component exposes students to:

- international business practices;
- the impact of culture on conducting international business;
- the views of managers and senior executives from a range of companies on global business issues; and
- other business areas or operations not directly related to the students’ major areas of study.

Expert practitioners in the field illustrate how their global organisations function through direct interaction with students, thus motivating students to better understand the nature of global business and the various issues involved in globalisation. Furthermore, company visits provide students with the opportunity to compare real-world scenarios with textbook representations. In most cases, the company hosts are senior executives (CEOs or CFOs), who are keen to share information on their experiences with young Australian business people. The immediacy of the visits and opportunity to ask questions of such senior staff motivates curiosity, inspires student engagement and encourages deep learning about global business issues. These issues can include the role of human capital, the development of marketing strategies, managing diversity, and the enormous significance of legal and ethical frameworks necessary to effectively undertake global business.

The coursework in this program is project based – there are no formal lectures or tutorials and no final exam. Rather, the subject is learner centred and provides a context in which students can acquire skills and develop knowledge at their own pace. Furthermore, an aim of the tour is to deepen the students’ discipline expertise as well as develop and test their acquisition of generic skills. Coursework assessment is based on a series of related business projects:

1. prior to the tour, students prepare country / company briefing notes, using the scenario of a CEO planning to visit a foreign country. Students focus on researching the relevant country and providing an insight into one of the companies to be visited whilst overseas;
2. whilst on tour, students record their individual observations and experiences during one business visit, and relate the information from the visit to the theory and concepts raised in their textbook;
3. students are assessed on their behaviour and participation during the tour including their contribution to group dynamics, and their engagement during the company visits; and
4. after the tour, students work in small teams to identify a business opportunity in one of the countries visited, explaining their choice of business and the cultural nuances that would impact on their business. The teams then present their business opportunity in a formal setting to senior staff in the Faculty. Not surprisingly, the level of enthusiasm (and stress) of the students at this stage is extremely high.

While overseas, students are given ownership of the many practical aspects of the study tour, for example, luggage, airport stopovers, public transport, foreign exchange, and navigation through foreign cities to visit businesses. This aims to improve their competence and confidence in self management. In a supported environment, students also learn to juggle their lives to meet an intensive business schedule in an unfamiliar culture and to negotiate a work-life balance by incorporating social activities. Students are encouraged to come together as inclusive entities, independently planning and executing extra-curricular activities, which further strengthens established bonds. Examples include visits to a third country (for example, China from Hong Kong), visits to rural areas, liaisons with potential workplace contacts, and trips to significant tourist venues.

Evaluation

The study tour program has been successfully operating for over eight years. Anecdotal information from both students and from staff accompanying the tour is that it has been successful in exposing students to international business and different cultures, albeit at the cost of high levels of stress to some students. Many of our students have no prior experience of other cultures or international travel, and while our student demographic is diverse with respect to age (some of our students are mature age and parents), several experienced severe culture shock and unexpectedly high levels of homesickness. However, no formal evaluation of the outcomes for students has previously been undertaken.

During 2008, a research project was initiated, intending to contact past students and ascertain their perspectives of the impact on them from participation in the study tour – both professionally and personally. The key research questions are:

1. In the short term, following completion of the study tour, do students feel they are more confident and competent to interact internationally?
2. Do students feel they have gained a more comprehensive insight into how international business operates?
3. Are these perceptions changed in the years following, after entering the workforce?
4. Are there aspects of the study tour program that can be improved for future students?

The research project has four phases:

1. interview the 2008 students shortly after they return from the tour;
2. interview the staff accompanying the 2008 tour to compare student and staff perceptions;
3. interview previous cohorts of students from 2007, 2006 and 2005; and
4. re-interview the 2008 students after 12–18 months to determine if their perspectives have changed, and to follow up on their employment outcomes.

This paper reports on the results from stages 1 and 2 of the project.
Method

Full ethics clearance was obtained from the Institution’s Human Research Ethics committee, prior to commencing this study. Students were contacted by email three months after completion of the unit (which was four months after completion of the tour), when all assessment was complete, to provide the opportunity for reflection on their experiences. Students were invited to participate in an interview with an Educational Developer (who at that stage was unknown to the students), and to provide feedback on their experiences from the tour. A small gift voucher (AUD $20) was offered in appreciation of their time.

Nine students undertook the tour in 2008, and all students consented to be interviewed. Seven interviews were conducted face to face, eight at the university and one at the new workplace of the student; and two interviews were conducted by telephone. All students were assigned a code number, and only this number was recorded with their responses, to de-identify the students when the collated data was later shared with the teaching team. However, it is acknowledged that with such a small cohort, the nature of their responses might identify some students to teaching staff, and this was mentioned to students prior to commencement of the interviews. No student chose to end the interview based on this information.

Student responses were manually recorded during the interview. This method was deliberately chosen over audio-recording, which was thought could be potentially intimidating to some students, who might doubt that the tapes remained confidential with the interviewer. In hindsight, after witnessing the distress related by a few students, we felt this approach was justified. However, it must be acknowledged that this does create an opportunity for interviewer bias to interfere with the data. In an effort to avoid this, students were encouraged to read what was being written, to ensure that their feedback was recorded accurately and verbatim as much as possible.

Due to the disparity between student responses, the teaching team who had accompanied the students on tour were consulted, to determine their perspectives on the same issues. After the student interviews were completed, the same questions were asked of the teaching staff, in a similar interview environment. In 2008, three staff accompanied the tour (two members who had accompanied the tour in previous years, and a newer staff member who was being inducted into the role). All three staff members agreed to be interviewed, and were asked their opinions of the impact the tour had on their students. Notes from these interviews were forwarded to the respective staff member after transcription, allowing them to edit or clarify their responses, before these were shared with the remaining members of the team.

After the staff interviews, the collated and de-identified student responses were provided to the teaching team, who were then asked for their reflections on the student responses.

Results and discussion

Student interviews

Although students were asked prepared questions during the interviews, students rarely kept to these topics, and instead responded as though they had been asked “Tell me about the study tour”. However, the interview questions were still useful in ensuring that all aspects of the tour were discussed.
Student responses were collated and categorised into six general areas:

- discipline-specific skills and knowledge;
- impact on the student’s employability and career options;
- generic skills (for example, teamwork, communications, problem-solving);
- personal skills (for example, confidence, cultural awareness);
- social issues (for example, interactions with each other, and with staff); and
- suggestions for future improvements.

**Discipline-specific skills**

Student responses on discipline-specific skills mostly focussed on the business visits and in particular, comparing different visits, and highlighting favourites. All students were highly positive about this aspect of the tour – they appreciated the access to such senior personnel and felt privileged that the hosts gave so generously of their time. In particular, students claimed that the information provided by the business hosts was more accessible and more memorable than similar information read from a textbook, primarily due to this information being first-hand and specific. Examples of student comments included:

- ... personal first-hand stories the key to making the info absorbing.
- ... more ‘real’ than reading a text book.
- ... challenged me to think outside the box.
- ... gave a real insight into what they do and why they do it.

**Employability**

Similarly, only positive comments were received about the perceived impact on student employability. All students have now featured the study tour on their resume, even those who found it a personally negative experience, indicating that they realise that potential employers will see this as a positive achievement, and that it sets them apart from other students. Typical comments from the students included:

- My new employers were very interested in this.
- [I] am very open to any international opportunities that may come up.
- [I] highlighted this on my resume under ‘Achievements’.

**Generic skills**

For generic skills, students spoke mostly about teamwork. When questioned further about other generic skills, they agreed they gained some personal confidence in public speaking, when interviewing the business hosts. Feelings about teamwork aspects were quite polarised, and appeared to be mostly related to last-minute shuffling of group members in two groups. Typical comments included:

- I felt I was a valued team member.
- The group selection process was very difficult.
- Within our team, we did have a different understanding of the task.
Most students interpreted their ‘team’ only to be the three-person project group, and failed to recognise the larger cohort of nine as another team that was expected to function and solve problems together. It was interesting that only one student recognised this aspect of teamwork as a strong element of the tour:

We had to rely on each other in a foreign country and alien culture.

**Personal skills**
Seven students claimed huge growth in their personal skills, including cultural awareness and personal confidence. The remaining two students felt that they were already quite skilled in this area. Examples of comments included:

... biggest aspect was the cultural differences.

This trip taught me a lot about myself.

One student recognised that the acquisition of these generic skills is an accumulative process:

I believe I accumulated these skills over the entire time at University.

**Social issues**
Students enjoyed the chance to get to know each other better and particularly appreciated the large diversity in age within the cohort. They also enjoyed working and socialising together. The most polarised responses were around the issue of student support during the tour. About half the students were upset about a perceived lack of support from staff, and some were quite traumatised about being required to independently find their way around the cities to company visits. These students appear to project their homesickness, cultural shock and any other negative experiences onto the staff:

Staff failed to engage with the students.

I feel that my money was used for a staff holiday.

The level of expressed trauma was surprising to the interviewer, and culminated in one student crying during the interview. The remaining students expressed positive opinions – they reported that they enjoyed the challenge and the independence required of them. Age was not a factor in this polarisation, but travel experience and ‘worldliness’ were: those most upset were either mature-age students who had never travelled before (including one who had never previously left her home state), or young students who had never previously left their immediate family or circle of friends. The responses from these students may indicate that inadequate support was provided for them. The more confident students, of any age, did not find support an issue, and openly criticised their student colleagues, with comments such as:

We are all adults, and need to be more mature and independent.

I don’t want to be mollycoddled.

**Suggestions for improvement**
When asked how the study tour could be improved for future students, responses fell into two broad areas – the time allocated for business visits, and advertising the tour to fellow students.
Four students felt they were under pressure to use the limited time with the business hosts wisely and to focus purely on their own needs for assessment – yet the hosts often wanted to discuss different topics. The students found these discussions very interesting and wanted to hear more, and felt it was rude to interrupt the host, yet at the same time they recognised that their hosts’ time was valuable:

... business reps would have liked more time with us.

Business hosts often wanted to talk about different topics, which were very interesting, but not strictly related to assessment.

Students would have liked a larger cohort in the unit, and reported that they often found out about the tour through *ad hoc* means. They suggested more advertising about the unit, to encourage more students to apply in future:

It was such a great opportunity and should be advertised more. Other students claimed not to have heard about it at all.

I found out about the study tour from a poster on campus, and I followed up on that. But it could have been advertised more – many students did not know about it.

Several students found the tour the most engaging and rewarding part of their University education, and wanted the tour kept exactly the same:

I loved every minute of it – the whole journey was great, the sights, sounds, smells, all of it.

Overall, I think the whole tour is great as it is, and I would go again if I had the chance. I would go every year if I could!

No students made any comments about their overseas accommodation, transport, or funding arrangements, indicating that these aspects of the tour were perceived to be well organised.

**Staff interviews**

Given the polarised nature of the student responses, particularly about support provided by staff while abroad, the teaching team were consulted about their perceptions of students’ experiences on the study tour. Staff were asked to respond to the same generic questions as students (for example, “Do you think that participation in the study tour has improved students’ competence to interact internationally?”). Staff responses were very similar. They believed that all students gained enormous business and cultural experience from the tour, even if they were unaware of it themselves. The teaching team were aware of the level of dissatisfaction amongst some students, but reported their firm belief that it is inappropriate for them to engage in close personal interactions with students – both because they assess students on later work, so need to maintain a professional distance, and also because a key unit objective is for students to become more independent in foreign cultures. They did acknowledge that students were definitely pushed out of their ‘comfort zone’, and that some students resented this.
The staff reported that the tour had helped many students recognise their career path, and the multidisciplinary nature of the business visits had helped students become better informed across broad areas. They also believe that students will benefit in their professional employability as a result of the tour. As one staff member observed:

These students have made a choice to go out and do something different, and industry rewards that.

**Staff reflections on student responses**

After the initial interviews with staff (reported above), staff were shown the collated and de-identified responses from students and asked to reflect on these, before responding. The staff were not surprised by the student responses – they were confident of the benefits for students, and aware of the personal trauma reported by some students, but still firmly believed that these students gained enormously from the experience.

**Conclusions**

Students participating in an international study tour to South-East Asia felt they had achieved the objectives of the unit. Specifically, they reported that they had:

- gained academically and professionally from meeting with senior managers from various global businesses;
- learnt how to put their previous studies into a real-world context; and
- could now see the relevance and operation of different business disciplines in the global environment.

These outcomes are particularly relevant in an increasingly globalised world, and support the inclusion of experiential learning opportunities such as these in our curriculum. Such broadening educational opportunities are aligned with the AUSSE benchmarks for engaging students, particularly those of Active Learning, and Enriching Educational Experiences (AUSSE, 2008a):

... participation in beyond-class experiences plays an important role in broader development of outcomes of higher education (p. 24).

Most students also reported huge personal growth in their cultural awareness, and in their confidence to live and work in a foreign culture. Students who had previously never considered working outside their home city are now actively looking for career opportunities in a different country. In addition to their expanding recognition of career options, students also claimed they learnt much about respecting different cultures. Our students’ experience reflects that reported by Sachau et al. (2009), who claims that short trips abroad, like study tours, can still have an acute effect on shaping attitudes, often more lasting than any effects on building students’ knowledge, and also by Romines (2008):

The impact of even a short-term international experience can prove profound for students as it changes their perception of the global world (p. 85).

However, several students, mostly with limited travel experience prior to the tour, found the tour personally traumatic, to a level unexpected by the interviewer. Symptoms described by the students match those described by Ferraro (2006) as classic symptoms of culture shock, who also states that:
… not everyone will experience all these symptoms, but almost all people will experience some (p. 153).

These students still recognised the value of the tour for them academically and professionally, but found the requirement to be independent of staff and the level of cultural shock and homesickness overwhelmingly distressing. The staff accompanying the tour recognised this, but still felt obliged to maintain a personal distance, hoping that these students would gain the confidence required. However, given the level of distress, still apparent two months after completion of the tour, it is apparent that additional scaffolding is likely to be required by some students. Staff will need to find a balance between encouraging independence and providing sufficient personal support. In describing a similar study tour, Koernig (2007) recommended dedicating time in the pre-trip workshops to building relationships – both student-student bonding and interactions between staff and individual students. Koernig suggests this can help reduce pre-trip anxiety and uncertainty in students. Improving staff-student rapport is also likely to help staff identify students who may require additional personal support. In light of this and our own experiences described in this paper, workshops prior to subsequent study tours have included more preparation on recognising and dealing with culture shock, and staff have focused more on gauging student confidence about independent travel.

This experience of culture shock reported by our students is commonly reported by expatriate business professionals, and is a major factor in the ultimate failure of many international business transfers, at considerable cost to the sponsoring organisation. An extensive review of the literature around expatriate culture shock conducted by Sims and Schraeder (2004) identified several factors that could boost expatriate placement success. Among these are the inclusion of a pre-departure visit (where prospective expatriates participate in a pre-assignment familiarisation visit), and pre-departure cross-cultural training. It is possible that study tours, such as the one described here, where students are taught about culture shock, and encouraged to become independent within a foreign culture, may help prepare graduates for international placements and help minimise the extent of culture shock experienced.

This aspect of student trauma has occurred in a few members of every student cohort since the inception of the study tour. We are currently interviewing students from previous cohorts (2005–2007 tours), and early results indicate that students do not report the same level of trauma when a significant time interval has elapsed since the tour. We are intending to re-interview this 2008 cohort of students to determine whether this group of students still feel the same two years after their tour.

**References**


Copyright © 2010 Debbi Weaver and Mark Tucker. The authors assign to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive license to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime site and mirrors) and within the portable electronic format HERDSA 2010 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.