

# **Assurance of learning in short-term, study abroad programs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Business students are increasingly seeking international experience in short-term, study abroad programs to enhance their intercultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and global perspectives to be more competitive in the global arena. Intuitively, universities initiating these programs and the students sojourning abroad believe in the importance of international learning experiences as a way to gain intercultural understanding, improve language and intercultural communication skills, enhance discipline-specific learning, and develop greater tolerance for ambiguity. Yet, despite the assertions that study abroad programs lead to unique and beneficial outcomes for students, assessment of learning in study abroad programs lags in consistent research on student growth and effectiveness of the programs in meeting stated learning objectives.

This paper provides a background of selected empirical research that has been conducted on study abroad program assessment, outlines a plan for assessment, and lists some research scales that have been used for study abroad programs assessment. Thus, this manuscript provides a foundation on which to advance the short-term, study abroad program assessment research beyond its infancy.

**Keywords:** assurance of learning, short-term study abroad programs, short-term study abroad empirical research

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization is impacting every country, company, organization, and person in ways like never before. As seen in the current economic crisis, a ripple effect from one geographic region's economy is quickly felt globally. Advances in technology and communication, along with increased globalization of business, have assured a more global society (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999). The reach of both domestic and multinational corporations transcends international boundaries. In fact, it is hard to imagine an organization that has not been touched by globalization. In tow, business curriculum is also becoming internationalized as administrators, faculty, and students acknowledge that developing skills to manage intercultural business interactions competently is crucial to success (Tuleja, 2006).

One of the ways in which business students are getting international knowledge and experience is through study abroad programs. Indeed, 53,008 business and management majors participated in study abroad programs in 2007/2008 (Institute of International Education, 2010), the second largest field of study sending students abroad (20.2%%), following only the social sciences (21.5%).

International experience provided by study abroad programs insures today's business students a competitive edge in the interview process when entering the job market, and ques these students for expatriate consideration later in their careers. As a result, US universities and especially business colleges recognize how important it is for their students to have international knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and global perspectives in order to be competitive in the global arena. In order to meet the increasing demand for an international experience and also make the experience more affordable for more students, the trend, especially for business schools, is toward short-term study abroad programs, which accounted for 56.3% of total study abroad students in 2008/2009 (Institute of International Education, 2010). Brian Whalen, President and CEO of *The Forum for Education Abroad*, notes that "short-term programs help to expand education abroad capacity by providing opportunities for students who are less likely to study abroad for longer periods" (<http://forumea.org/standards-index.cfm>).

Clearly, the universities initiating these study abroad programs, and the students enrolling in them, see the importance of international learning experiences for being successful in today's global society. In particular, universities assert that study abroad students may gain intercultural understanding; develop language and/or intercultural communication skills; enhance discipline-specific learning outcomes appropriate to the curriculum; experience opportunities to strengthen leadership skills, service orientation, maturity, and a tolerance for ambiguity; and/or undertake language development opportunities (Lashbrooke, et al., 2002).

However, despite the assumption that study abroad programs lead to unique and beneficial outcomes for students, there is a dearth of consistent research on the outcomes of such programs on both student growth and the effectiveness of the programs in meeting stated learning objectives. According to a report by Michigan State University's Center for International Business Education and Research, part of the difficulty of assessment is the vast variety of study abroad programs that hinders the development of a one-size-fits-all research scale. Regardless, in order to ensure the effectiveness and/or strengthen the study abroad programs, it is crucial that the programs be evaluated.

Unfortunately, study abroad outcomes assessment research is lagging behind the assessment of learning in other academic programs. This may be due, in large part, to the fact that it is not yet mandated by accreditation requirements. Nevertheless, it is prudent for business study abroad programs be accountable in order to improve delivery and to assure that students and parents are getting a good return on money invested in these programs. Popular press is calling for increased collegiate outcomes assessment and demands that the public hold colleges more accountable and that assessment data be comparable between institutions (Cruz, 2010). Yet, according to Lashbrooke, et al. (2002), many business schools are not conducting formal evaluations of their study abroad programs or examining what benefits such programs bring to the students. Moreover, many programs do not have clearly defined objectives on which the program is to be assessed. As a result, even if administrators wanted to conduct an evaluation of the programs, it may be difficult to do so.

Given these criticisms, the Forum on Education Abroad (Bolin, 2010) challenges all study abroad programs to have established and regularly applied internal and external processes to assure that programs meet projected educational objectives for student learning and student development. In line with this, the goal of this paper is to provide a background of selected research that has been conducted on study abroad program assessment, to outline a plan for STSA program assessment, and to list some research scales that have been used for study abroad program assessment. By doing so, this manuscript may provide a foundation on which to advance the study abroad program assessment research beyond its infancy.

## **STUDY ABROAD RESEARCH**

Steinberg (2007; In Bolen, 2007) identifies five general categories of positive study abroad benefits that may result from students' learning through sojourning internationally in study abroad experiences:

- Academic progress and intellectual development
- Change in attitudes, such as increased tolerance towards others, self-confidence, global awareness, cultural sensitivity, and decreased ethnocentrism
- Skill development, including foreign language proficiency, intercultural communication, coping with ambiguity, critical thinking
- Understanding and appreciation of the world and one's place in it, e.g., reflection on other and one's own cultures, perspectives on the role played by politics and the arts in the human condition; and
- Career benefits, such as employment opportunities, better perceived interpersonal skills by employers, improved job performance (Steinberg, 2007)

Research on study abroad outcomes corroborates these categories, finding that student growth occurs on a variety of variables such as intercultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard, 2006; Williams, 2005), cultural awareness (Black and Duhon, 2006; Kitsantas, 2004), and worldmindedness (Douglas and Jones-Ridders, 2001; Kehl and Morris, 2007), etc. Table 1 provides a list of some empirical studies on study abroad assessment, along with the topic researched, the research design, and the measurement scales used.

Intercultural sensitivity was researched by Anderson, et al. (2006) to determine the impact of a short-term study abroad program on intercultural sensitivity. Students completed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer & Bennett, 2002) before their program abroad and four weeks later on their return to the United States. Study results suggest that even a

short-term program (e.g., 4 weeks) led to some increases in students' intercultural sensitivity. Kitsantas (2004) investigated the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding for students studying abroad in five different countries. Results from this study indicate that students score significantly higher on cross-cultural skills and global understanding as a result of studying abroad.

These studies advance support for the claim that study abroad programs aid in the development of intercultural skills and mindsets. Although these studies are important, more rigorous methodological research will increase validity in research findings. Specifically, use of a control group might provide stronger evidence that increases in intercultural sensitivity can definitively be attributed to studying abroad. For example, Douglas and Jones-Ridders (2001) conducted a study on world-mindedness with students who had recently completed a study abroad program and compared findings with students who had never studied abroad (control group). Findings support many study abroad programs' claim that students who study abroad have a stronger sense of world-mindedness than those who have never studied abroad.

Along the same lines, Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) completed a large-scale assessment of students' attitudes after a short-term study abroad program. They compared "global awareness" (i.e., intercultural awareness, personal growth and development, awareness of global interdependence, and functional geography and language) between a control group of students who had finished a 5-week winter course on the home campus with students who had completed short-term study abroad programs. Results indicate that study abroad students had higher global awareness for nearly all items.

Further, although the studies evaluated growth in certain variables that are thought to be affected by such programs, the effectiveness of study abroad programs would be better evaluated if clearly-stated program objectives were identified and assessed. Some researchers have recognized this need and begun research on program evaluation and outcomes. For example, Black and Duhon (2006) investigated the impact of business study abroad programs on cultural awareness and personal development. However, in accordance with suggested standards, the faculty developed educational objectives for the program as well as means of assessing those objectives. More specifically, the objectives they set forth for a summer abroad program were that: "students who participate in the British Studies Program will become (a) more cross-culturally tolerant and empathetic, and (b) more self-confident and independent" (p. 141). The results of the study indicated that, indeed, students in the study abroad program had enhanced cultural awareness and personal development, although no control group was used to further support these findings.

Additionally, Tuleja (2006) evaluated a short-term MBA program abroad in meeting its stated objectives. However, unlike Black and Duhon, Tuleja used qualitative methodologies to assess the program outcomes. In particular, descriptive pre- and post-test surveys, as well as student papers were examined to evaluate the effectiveness of this study abroad program, resulting in the determination that "even short-term exposure to learning and living overseas can significantly enhance one's intercultural awareness and appreciation of international business and culture" (p. 1).

Further, Gullekson, et al. (2011b) conducted a control-group, objective-based study and found predicted changes in ethnocentrism, intercultural communication apprehension, international awareness for study abroad students; however, when compared to the control group, the changes had little significance. These findings call for stronger development of empirical, short-term study abroad research that can be validated longitudinally through replication.

Although in its infancy, study abroad assessment is moving toward more empirical and sound research. Key to stronger research findings in assessing learning in short-term, study abroad is stringent planning.

## **PLANNING FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OF STUDY ABROAD**

The above studies suggest that study abroad programs may lead to many beneficial outcomes for students. Yet, to assure increased learning and to strengthen assessment of learning, it is crucial to set the stage. Far more than in the traditional classroom, study-abroad programs shift much of the balance of power from faculty to students in the learning process, for a large portion of the learning abroad is intangible and occurs outside the classroom. Freire (1993) called education a vehicle for social change. This was echoed by Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons (1998, p. 57; In Weimer, 2002, p. 8) who declared: “Education’s role is to challenge inequality and dominant myths rather than socialize students into the status quo. Learning is directed toward social change and transforming the world...”

According to Huba and Freed (2000), the four fundamental elements of learner-centered assessment can be achieved by (1) formulating statements of intended learning outcomes, (2) developing or selecting assessment measures, (3) creating experiences leading to outcomes, and (4) using assessment results to improve learning.

The Forum on Education Abroad standards committee maintains that certain standards of good practice begin with the establishment of a mission, objectives, and purpose of the short-term education abroad program. To assure effective assessment of learning in short-term education abroad programs, it is imperative that the program aligns with the education abroad mission of the organization and has a clearly-defined purpose with definitive academic and/or experiential student-centered learning goals (The Forum..., 2009).

### **Mission, Objectives and Purpose**

The program is organized according to the mission and policies of the sponsoring institution and has a clearly-defined purpose and clearly-defined academic and/or experiential goals and objectives. Likewise, the focus of the program is appropriate to the site chosen. According to Angelo & Cross (1993), these goals and objectives provide the reference points we need to measure the program and to determine whether we are headed in the right direction. Equally important is that the student learning and development in the study abroad program be developed to support the mission, objectives, and purpose.

### **Student Learning and Development**

The program is reviewed in the light of its stated educational purpose for fostering student learning and development. The program:

- provides opportunities that encourage student development (e.g., leadership skills, service orientation, maturity, tolerance for ambiguity, growth in cultural awareness).
- fosters discipline-specific and/ or interdisciplinary learning outcomes appropriate to the curriculum, site, and program goals.
- provides language and intercultural development opportunities appropriate to its mission.

- includes opportunities for intrapersonal development through reflection during and after the experience.
- fosters environmental and cultural responsibility through faculty, staff and student awareness and minimization of harmful individual and program-related environmental and social-cultural impacts.
- assesses student learning outcomes and overall student experience at the program's conclusion so that subsequent programs are improved based on this assessment. (The Forum..., 2009)

## **Empirical Assessment of Study Abroad Programs**

Despite the suggested importance of study abroad for students, sparse empirical research has been published that addresses the outcomes of such program for students or for the effectiveness of the programs in meeting stated objectives. Indeed, Gillespe (2002) contends that, although the assessment of academic goals regularly occurs, the definition and assessment of intercultural goals of study abroad programs is still lacking. Thus, Gillespe rallies for improved assessment of these programs, which includes both qualitative and quantitative measures and established minimum standards for every program. Below is a list of measures that are being used in study abroad research:

- Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory [CCAI] (Kelly & Meyers, 1995)
- Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997a)
- Global Competency and Intercultural Sensitivity Index [ISI] (Olsen and Kroeger, 2001)
- Intercultural Communication Apprehension Scale (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997b)
- Intercultural Development Inventory [IDI] (Hammer & Bennett, 2001)
- Intercultural Learning Outcomes (Sutton and Rubin, 2004)
- Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory [ICSI] (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992)
- International Awareness and Activities Survey (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004)
- Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2001)
- Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (Petrides & Furnham, 2009)

A roundtable of more than sixty faculty and administrators from the United States, Europe, and Asia, brainstormed solutions to issues surrounding study abroad and made several recommendations for assessment research in study abroad programs in business schools:

- Future assessment research needs to be done inter-institutionally
- A study abroad classification system needs to be developed
- Intercultural learning needs to be included as an outcome of any assessment
- Researchers need to identify the right intercultural instrument
- Long-range impact studies need to be included

Another point stressed for study abroad assessment research was the “need for uniformity in measurements and comparisons for research to be meaningful” (Lashbrooke, et al., 2002, p. 14).

## **Utilizing Outcomes Assessment Information to Improve Learning and Inform Stakeholders**

Program assessment provides data that informs those involved in development and implementation specific ways that the program can be changed to enhance student learning. Huba and Freed remind us that:

Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from the multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning. (2000, p. 8)

Therefore, in the process of interpreting our program's learning assessment data, new ways of enhancing student learning may emerge and be used to improve the program and enhance students' study abroad experience. Further, assessment data provides ways to enhance student learning through feedback, both during and after study abroad. In addition, outcomes assessment serves as a way to give parents information about the learning that occurred in the program. Assessment data, then, "provide documentation, beyond anecdotes"...that form "a more compelling argument" (Deardorff. 2007, p. 223).

## **Conclusion**

Assessment of learning is crucial in short-term study abroad in order to learn how we can improve our programs and enable our students to gain maximum learning from the experience. It is also essential to raise the standards of the field as a whole so that all study abroad programs align with the best practices of defining study abroad objectives and testing these through student evaluations, program reviews, using outside examiners, and learning assessment instruments. Much of the research that has been done has lacked rigor in its methodology (e.g., no control group; post-test only), while other programs simply lack objectives by which to evaluate their programs. However, the good news is there is room for improvement in both assessing outcomes and evaluating programs. Moreover, the research that has been conducted suggests such programs are beneficial to students and has highlighted various approaches to evaluating study abroad programs, namely quantitative and qualitative methods. Steinberg reminds us that:

...international educators need to demonstrate that the students on our programs return home having grown intellectually and personally, having developed a greater measure of global and intercultural competence and, when relevant, having developed greater fluency in languages other than English. We also need to demonstrate that they are much better prepared for careers in a global environment. While we feel confident that this happens because our students and our former students tell us what happened to them, we need to demonstrate empirically that these outcomes would not have been achieved to the same degree if these students had stayed home. (Steinberg, 2007, p. 19)

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**Table 1: Study Abroad Assessment Research**

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Design and Measurement</u>
STSA and intercultural sensitivity	Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard (2006)	Pretest - posttest design, no control group, Intercultural Development Inventory
Business STSA, cultural awareness and personal development	Black & Duhon (2006)	Pretest - posttest design, no control group, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Inventory (CCAI)
Global awareness and STSA	Chieffo & Griffeths (2004)	2 group, posttest only, Measure developed by researchers
Motivation and goals to study abroad in international students	Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, & Lynch (2007)	Concurrent, Self-regulation questionnaire, Goals for study abroad
Worldmindedness	Douglas & Jones-Rikkens (2001)	Posttest only, control group
Trait Emotional Intelligence, ethnocentrism, intercultural communication apprehension, international awareness	Gullekson & Tucker (2011a)	Pretest-posttest design, Trait EI Questionnaire (TEIQueSF), Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale, Intercultural Communication Apprehension Scale, International Awareness and Activities Scale
Ethnocentrism, intercultural communication apprehension, international awareness	Gullekson, Tucker, Coombs, & Wright (2011b)	Pretest-posttest design, control group, Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale, Intercultural Communication Apprehension Scale, International Awareness and Activities Scale
Global Mindedness with both short and long-term study abroad program	Kehl & Morris (2007)	3 group posttest only (control group= students intending to go abroad), Global Mindedness Scale
SA goals on the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding	Kitsantas (2004)	Pretest – posttest design, no control group, Study Abroad Goals Scale CCAI

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Design and Measurement</u>
STSA and strategies to enhance learning/ program outcomes	Lewis & Neisenbaum (2005)	Posttest only, no control, Qualitative and quantitative design
Business student career plans	Orahood, Wolf, & Kruze (2008)	2 group, posttest only, (retrospective view)
Actual and Potential Intercultural Adjustment	Savicki, Downing-Burnette, Heller, Binder & Suntinger (2004)	2 group, pretest-posttest
MBA STSA programs and Intercultural Appreciation and Awareness	Tuleja (2006)	Pretest-posttest, no control, Qualitative and quantitative design
Intercultural communication skills	Williams (2005)	2 group, pretest-posttest