Study Abroad Programs — Students' Perceptions Examined

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of students' views on 'study abroad programs'. A convenience sample of 188 undergraduate and postgraduate students in an Australian university voluntarily completed a two-part questionnaire administered during tutorial class. Forty-one per cent of the respondents reported that they had been participants in study abroad programs. Demographic characteristics such as age, place of residence/birth, or level of study (undergraduate versus postgraduate) tend to influence whether one participates or not in study abroad programs. Results were discussed with suggestion for further research.
Keywords: Study abroad program, perceptions, higher education, students, Australia

Introduction

Some studies have to date been conducted on aspects of study abroad programs. Neppel (2005) has reported that children of the wealthy that were the ones who traveled on study abroad programs to Western Europe for their entire post-secondary education. However, between the two world wars the socio-demographic composition of students who participated in study abroad programs changed. Whilst Armfield (2004) reports on the increasing participation rates in the US since 1950s, Hubbard, Anderson, Lawton and Rexeisen (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. Stewart and Dedee (2003) reiterate that the strongest impact of study abroad programs relate to aspects of knowledge of international and trans-cultural issues. Female students exhibited greater language interest, lower ethnocentrism, lower intercultural communication apprehension and prejudice than their male counterparts (Kim and Goldstein, 2005). According to Kistna's (2004) study abroad programs enhance students' understanding of cross-cultural and global issues, emotional resilience, openness and flexibility, perceptual acuity and personal autonomy. Workman (2002) writes that students showed no openness to diversity at the beginning. However, students achieved significant gains after they participated in the study abroad program, supported by Arm field (2004) who reported a significant increase in the level of intercultural sensitivity after students returned from their study abroad programs. 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.

Purpose and Method of the Study

Given the limited studies that addressed students' perceptions of study abroad programs, this current study aimed at gauging university students' perceptions about study abroad programs. For this study, study abroad program is that educational program undertaken outside of the geographical boundaries of the country of origin for a semester. Part one of the questionnaire

consisting of 12 statements was drawn from previous studies by Goldstein and Kim, 2006; Wortman, 2002, Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn and Terenzini, 1996. 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 in the last 12 months. Ethical clearance was obtained before the survey questionnaires were distributed in convenience sample of tutorials and lectures. A voluntary participation yielded 188 completed questionnaires, which were analysed using SPSS 13.

Results and Discussions

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The majority of respondents were females (58%), undergraduates (59%), Australian students (37%), with mean age of 23.3 years, and the majority of respondents having no previous participation in study abroad programs (58%). A chi-square (χ^2) test on participation levels indicated statistically significant differences concerning the *age group, level of study, usual residence,* and *place of birth*. Generally, older, postgraduate, and overseas students would more likely have participated in study abroad programs (Table 1).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profiles of Participants in Study Abroad Program (N=188)

Variables	**Categories**	**Participated**	χ^2	**Sig.**
Gender	Male	17.6%	.004	.947
(n = 188)	Female	23.9%		
Age group	22 years or younger	14.5%	11.72	.001
(n = 186)	23 years or older	26.9%		
Level of study	Undergraduate	18.1%	13.14	.000
(n = 188)	Postgraduate	23.4%		
Usual residence	Australia	5.3%	32.73	.000
(n =188)	Overseas	36.2%		
Place of birth	Australia	2.7%	23.52	.000
(n = 188)	Overseas	38.8%		

Respondents perceived study abroad programs as opportunities to learn about other cultures, learn foreign languages, mix with different people, adapt to other cultures, and appreciate values that are different from their own. Moreover, developing self-confidence and an appreciation of the programs as being an important part of university studies were additional positive outcomes expected from participating in study abroad programs (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
…would be stressful**	4.44	1.54
…would teach the same things locally or through international study**	3.43	1.66
…would be boring to interact with other cultures**	2.14	1.41

* *Scale rating: 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree.* ** *Negatively-worded statements.*

Inclusion of the three negatively worded statements (**) (Table 2) for further analyses affected the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) level (.66), hence removal of these statements from further analysis was necessary. This increased α level to .75. Removal of these statements was justified based on earlier studies addressing the problematic nature of such items. For example, Weems and Onwuegbuzie (2001 p. 174) reiterated that 'the positively worded items and the negatively worded items may not be measuring the same underlying trait.' This was supported by Herche and Engelland (1996 p.372) who called 'into question the widely accepted practice of using reversed-polarity items in measurement scales and to highlight the significant potential risk of reducing the unidimensionality of measures.' Barnette (2000, p. 369) warns of the dangers of using negatively worded items and concludes that ' it is somewhat disturbing to consider the loss of score reliability and validity that has been the result of the extensive use of negatively worded items when this has been shown to be detrimental to internal consistency.'

Correlations Statistics

The author investigated relationship between the nine positively worded statements using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (*r*). Preliminary assessment of assumptions showed no violation of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. Overall, there were strong, 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 3).

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*

Groups Compared

The results of the MANOVA analysis indicated that age, residence, place of birth, level of study as well as one of the nine statements, '*studying abroad is an important part of university study*' had significant effect on the participation level of the respondents. The multivariate level tests of the main effect of the demographic variables and the nine statements indicated significant differences at the $p < .001$ level in importance given to the 'participation' variable (Wilks' lambda (λ) = .731; $F_{(14, 164)}$ = 4.312; p = .000) with partial eta squared (η^2) value of .269, which according to Cohen (1988), is considered large. The univariate tests also showed statistically significant F values ranging from 11.647 to 40.342. The proportion of the variances (η^2) in the variables that could be explained by the level of participation ranged from small effect of .054 (5.4%) for current level of study to a large effect of .186 (18.6%) for usual residence (Tables 4).

Table 4: MANOVA Multivariate Results for Main Effects for "participation"

Variables	**F-value**	**Sig.**	**η^2**
Studying abroad is an important part of …	11.647	.001	.062
Current level of study	10.129	.002	.054
Usual residence	7.781	.000	.186
Country of birth	26.211	.000	.129
Age	13.528	.000	.071

Conclusion

This current study gauged the perceptions of university students about study abroad programs. Results, consistent with previous studies (see, for example, Armfield, 2004; Kim and Goldstein, 2005; Kitsantas, 2004), indicated that study abroad programs provide students with 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 with age, residence, level of study and place of birth on some statements. Age (older age group), level of study (postgraduate), and usual residence/place of birth (overseas) would more likely influence participation in study abroad programs. However, caution is required

because a small sample based on convenience sampling in a single university campus would not provide a general sable conclusion. Hence, further examination of factors influencing university students to participate in study abroad programs would be a logical extension.

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