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A Longitudinal Study of Student Outcomes from Participation in an International Study Tour: Some Preliminary Findings

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A Longitudinal Study of Student Outcomes from Participation in an International Study Tour: Some Preliminary Findings

Abstract

Students returning from an international business study tour program were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of the professional and personal impact of the program. When interviews were conducted within 3-4 months of the students' return, mixed responses were received, with some students highly positive about their experiences, but other students highly distressed about the level of independence required of them. When students were consulted two to six years after the completion of the program, including re-interviewing the initial study participants, students appeared more able to appreciate the benefits of the program. This was evident in their responses that highlighted an improvement in discipline-based knowledge, a better understanding of personal and intercultural issues, and the further development of their generic academic skills. Negative emotions had all but disappeared from students' responses. While these findings are from small sample sizes and are not conclusive, the results raise important questions about the timing of critical program evaluations.

Keywords

International business study tour; Learning outcomes; Interdisciplinary study; Evaluation

Introduction

Continuing global financial uncertainty and its impact on international business has highlighted the challenges for modern business graduates entering the global business environment. This has turned the spotlight on educators and how we prepare our students for international employment. For our graduates to be effective employees, they need not only strong skills in their chosen discipline, but also a keen awareness of how multinational businesses operate across national borders, and an acute understanding of cultural diversity and its impact on business functions.

In an attempt to meet these needs, many higher-education institutions have used international study tours and short-term exchange programs, which have appeared to be ideal vehicles for blending concepts and material discussed in the classroom with the real-world business environment. The educational merits of a study tour have been widely reported, and include:

- increased cultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006),
- improved student confidence (Weaver & Tucker 2010),
- heightened appreciation for other cultures (Pence & Macgillivray 2008),
- increased international functional knowledge (Chieffo & Griffiths 2004),
- deeper understanding of global interdependence (Sutton & Rubin 2004),
- increased interest in working or studying in a different country (Orahood, Kruze & Easley Pearson 2004; Weaver & Tucker 2010) and
- interest in interdisciplinary studies (Lewis & Niesenbaum 2005).

(adapted from Sachau et al. 2010).

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 within 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 three-year 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. Students are mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, many the first in their family to undertake higher education, and most have little or no international travel experience. Student ages vary widely, from young school-leavers through to middle-age (mid-50s), although most are from an Anglo-Saxon cultural background.

The study tour program is multidisciplinary and experiential (similar to the approach recommended by Tchaïcha and Davis, 2005), 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 self-confidence as potential global citizens. It is hoped that these objectives will improve the

students' success in identifying new employment opportunities, enhance their current career path and help them become effective members of the global community.

Although developed independently, the program closely follows the three-phase model recommended by Porth (1997):

1. Pre-tour program
2. Study tour
3. Post-tour program

The pre-tour program consists of coursework (covering topics such as company operations, business ethics, marketing and HR management) and a two-day pre-departure seminar program (covering topics such as travel arrangements, working in teams, cultural nuances of the destination countries and personal health while travelling). The importance of pre-departure sessions has been highlighted by Koernig (2007) as critical for building bonds among students, and between students and the staff accompanying the tour.

The actual tour lasts approximately two weeks, visiting two cities in different countries, chosen for their contrasting business practices. In each country, students visit a range of companies operating in different fields (for example, law, government, manufacturing, service, banking and construction), and interview senior executives about how their organisations function. The academic unit finishes with a post-tour program, where students work in teams to identify a business opportunity in one of the countries visited, and present their plans (including research on possible cultural impacts etc.) to senior faculty members. Further details of this program are provided in Weaver and Tucker (2010).

One of the key objectives of this program is to expose students to different cultures. Many of our students have never left Australia, and are anxious about many aspects of travelling and working in different countries. It is hoped that, 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). We strongly support the statement made by Porth:

“Reading and studying culture is an important prerequisite for going international, but the experience of culture produces a deeper understanding” (1997, p 193).

A two-week tour gives limited opportunity for engaging deeply with a culture, but does provide opportunities for students to learn how to perform simple tasks in very unfamiliar environments, such as navigating around a strange city, negotiating purchases, trying different foods and gift-giving. Accordingly, we ensure that our students are given responsibility for 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. Staff accompany the students on all official visits, but endeavour to provide only back-up support – students are expected to lead the group in getting to destinations. 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.

Aim

During 2008, an evaluation project was initiated, asking past students for their perspectives of the personal and professional impact of participation in the study tour. The key research questions identified were:

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. Do these perceptions change after a time lapse of several years?
4. Are there aspects of the study-tour program that can be improved for future students?

The research project had four phases:

1. Interview the 2008 student cohort, shortly after returning from their 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 a delay of 12-18 months (to determine if their perspectives have changed, and to follow up on their employment outcomes).

The results from stages 1 and 2 of the project have previously been reported (Weaver & Tucker 2010); this paper reports the results of the final two stages. Our earlier results revealed an extreme disparity in student satisfaction with the study tour. While all students believed they had gained academically and professionally from the company visits, and believed they had learnt how to put their academic studies into a real-world context, about half the student cohort reported high levels of personal anxiety, to the point of trauma, apparently associated with a perceived lack of faculty support while in a foreign country. The other half reported exactly the opposite experience, claiming that while they were challenged by taking responsibility for many of the organisational matters, they enjoyed the challenge, and knew that staff support was on hand if required.

This extreme disparity in student perceptions was difficult to understand in such a small group (only nine students in 2008), leading us to extend our investigation to previous cohorts. As a control method, since these cohorts were being interviewed some years after their study tour, the original 2008 students were re-interviewed in 2010, two years after their tour, to determine if their perceptions had changed.

Methodology and Data Collection

A descriptive research methodology was undertaken for this study. Descriptive research aims to provide a detailed and accurate picture of a particular situation; in this case the attitude of students participating in a study tour (Nueman, 2006). This methodology involved the use of semi-structured interviews for data-gathering, followed by the use of thematic analysis of student responses. These approaches were used because of the relatively small sample size, the need to recall student experiences over a period of time and the expectation that the data collected would contribute to a more sophisticated study. It is important to note that this study did not attempt to measure actual learning outcomes; rather, it aimed to describe students' *perceived* learning outcomes and experiences (Chieffo & Griffiths 2004). It is also important to acknowledge that student enrolments in this unit were necessarily low (due to the logistics associated with the organisation of the study tour), so the potential sample of interviewees was also small, leading to

low numbers for this study. Accordingly, the results only provide broad insights into student outcomes, and therefore need to be interpreted with caution.

Full ethics clearance was obtained from the Institution's Human Research Ethics committee before this study was begun.

Interviews

Participants from the 2007, 2006 and 2005 study tours were contacted and 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 (\$20AUD) was offered in appreciation of their time. Initial attempts at contact were via email, using the last known email address for each student, and if no response was received after several weeks, a letter was sent to their last known address. In some cases, students had kept in touch with their tour-group peers, and provided current contacts for fellow colleagues.

Next, the 2008 cohort of students were re-interviewed two years after their initial interviews, in an attempt to determine if their feelings had changed in the intervening period, during which most had entered the workforce. This would also provide a useful control comparison with the data collected from the previous cohorts, and allow a longitudinal comparison to be made against their original responses.

Interviews were conducted in person (where possible) or by telephone, and in two cases where students were now employed overseas, via email. 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 before the interviews. No student chose to end the interview at this point.

Where actual interviews were conducted (in person or by telephone), student responses were manually recorded and read back to the student for confirmation, to ensure that their feedback was recorded accurately and verbatim as much as possible. 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. However, it must be acknowledged that this did create an opportunity for interviewer bias to interfere with the data.

All students were asked the following questions:

1. Do you think that participation in the study tour has improved your *competence* to interact internationally?
2. What about personal skills? Do you think the study tour has had any impact on your *confidence* to interact internationally? What about on your teamwork skills and/or communications skills?
3. Do you feel that you have gained a more comprehensive insight into how international business operates?
4. Do you think that participation in the study tour has improved your employability?
5. Are there aspects of the study tour that can be improved for future students?

It must be acknowledged that while the wording of these questions was intended as a guide only, the interviewer often used this exact wording. The wording of these questions can be considered leading to a positive bias, which may have skewed the responses. In hindsight, more care should have been taken over the phrasing of the interview questions.

Despite this limitation, these questions were used to structure the interview, and discussion was allowed to venture into other areas of the tour, and of the students' subsequent career and travel experiences.

Thematic Analysis

The responses to the interview questions were analysed for important themes. The themes were based on six categories, which emerged from the responses in Stage 1 of this research project (Weaver & Tucker 2010):

- Discipline-specific skills and knowledge
- Impact on the students' employability and career options
- Generic skills (e.g. teamwork, communications, problem-solving)
- Personal development (e.g. confidence, cultural awareness)
- Interpersonal interactions (e.g. interactions with each other, and with staff)
- Suggestions for future improvements

Results

Contacting previous students proved difficult: contact email addresses provided to the institution were often out of date, and follow-up letters to the last known postal address rarely elicited a response. Nevertheless, when contact was made, all students agreed to be interviewed (100% participation rate for those contacted), providing an overall response rate of 52%.

Table 1: Response rates from invitations

| Tour year & destination | 2008 Shanghai & Hanoi | | 2007 Kuala Lumpur & Hong Kong | 2006 Kuala Lumpur & Hanoi | 2005 Suva & Singapore |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Year of interview | 2008 (Initial interview) | 2010 (Re-interview) | 2009 | 2009 | 2009 |
| Response rate | 9/9 (100%) | 5/9 (55%) | 5/9 (55%) | 4/14 (29%) | 3/9 (33%) |
| Overall response rate | 26/50 (52%) | | | | |

Study Tours of 2005-2007

For the purposes of this paper, responses from the three earlier student cohorts (2005, 2006 and 2007 classes) were combined, to allow comparison with the 2008 class.

Interviewees of these three cohorts reported only positive outcomes from their participation in the study tour, with none of the negativity or apparent distress reported from the initial 2008 interviews evident. Most of these earlier cohorts claimed a significant impact on their subsequent career choices and opportunities, and perceived large improvements in their cultural awareness and personal confidence. However, as acknowledged above, the phrasing of the questions posed in interviews may have led to a positive bias in responses.

Each of the six themes identified in the earlier phase of the study is discussed separately below. The code following the comment refers to the individual student and year of tour.

Discipline-specific skills

Students reported a broadening of their understanding of how businesses operate in global markets, and also an appreciation of the challenges associated with operating in different cultures:

There are many things we can't learn from a textbook, that we can learn from visits like this, for example, types of products used in different areas, selection of target markets, and growth strategies and how to expand the business (resource-wise) to cope with that. (01-06)

Being able to see from an international perspective how overseas business operates, I was able to then compare how my current employer operates, and compare the differences and similarities – that has been the most interesting aspect. (03-06)

I now comprehend how businesses have to deal with different laws, and juggle employees due to different employees' rights. A business's employees are of mixed cultures and religions, especially in Kuala Lumpur, and each have their own public holidays, so they have a major job juggling these and still manag[ing] to keep the work going. (04-07)

Employability and career options

All students interviewed believed their career options had improved as a result of participating in the study tour, and many reported that it broadened their horizons, leading them to consider employment options they had not previously entertained:

It had never occurred to me that I would be able to utilise my psychology degree within human resources at a bank. The complexity of how a bank is structured and run had never crossed my mind and the tour included [two banks], which further sparked my interest in working within the finance sector. (01-05)

It greatly enhanced my CV and allowed me to draw on examples during an interview that demonstrate a willingness to develop myself as a young professional. I can highlight my confidence, global awareness and above all else my ability to travel and adapt easily and effectively. (02-06)

*I have featured my participation in this trip on my resume, and have been asked for more information at all job interviews I have gone for. The exposure to the different organisations has been a positive for me. Prospective employers have **all** picked up on this! (01-07)*

Generic skills

Most students focused on improvements in their teamwork and communication skills, as well as increased negotiation and networking skills.

Not only did I improve my communication skills in terms of writing and presenting, I also improved my networking skills, [which] I was able to utilise post-university to assist in obtaining employment. (01-05)

My experience has helped me know how to be presentable to different people. I now have more skills in interacting with different people from different cultures. (04-06)

My teamwork certainly improved. Our main group did lots of things together, and while there were some issues for us all, being away from our friends and families, we were all in the same situation, and we relied on each other for support. (01-07)

Personal development

Personal growth was the area where all students perceived significant improvements. All interviewees reported increased personal confidence in travelling independently, working with those from different cultures and public speaking. For many of these students, this was their first international travel experience, and this is reflected in their comments:

I learnt lots about interacting with different cultures. I have used this at work with Asian visitors to Australia, for example, knowing the polite mannerisms, what to avoid, how to give business cards etc. (02-05)

It impacted in a major way on my cultural sensitivity. I am far more aware of differences in values, beliefs and lifestyles that are faced when dealing with people internationally. As a result I have become very conscience of the way I deal with those from other cultural backgrounds – as if I have an internal sensor that encourages me to be objective in my dealings with other non-Australians and evaluate my initial reactions, which in most cases tend to be related to an underlying stigma towards that particular group. (02-06)

I definitely feel it helped me. Just trying to interact with people, with the language barrier, it improved my patience, I learnt to be less impatient and frustrated with people whose first language is not English. (06-07)

Interpersonal interactions

Student comments in this category were much fewer, and focused on the positive aspects of working independently (from the teaching staff) and being part of a student team:

I think it's great that whilst there are still "teachers" accompanying you on the tour, you are very much left alone to make your own decisions, and are responsible for all your actions. (01-05)

Four years on and I can definitely see the huge benefits of the tour: it highlights areas for future employment, you gain first-hand knowledge and experience of global organisations, you get to experience "work and play" cultures in countries foreign to you and you meet great people. I joined the tour not knowing any of the other eight people, and three years on I am still in contact with half of them. (02-05)

Suggestions for improvement

The interviewer asked specifically how the study tour could be improved for future students. About half the responses were to make no changes at all to the program. Other students suggested encouraging greater participation, and more or less time at the destination cities, or more or less time in pre-tour workshops, as illustrated in the following comments:

Advertise the tour as something that will significantly increase a student's employability. I have no doubt it was the study tour that sold me to my first employer and the reason why I'm now working in a professional role abroad. Self-reliance and personal growth are the real benefits and well worth the financial investment. (02-06)

It was such a good experience. I would definitely do it again, and would absolutely recommend it to other students to take. It should be more strongly recommended to all students. The straight degree is not enough to prepare us for business, so programs like this tour are essential. They show the practical application of what you have been learning. The theory is not enough by itself. (03-07)

Only one very minor suggestion: I would have liked an extra day in Hong Kong, but only because we had packed so much in and were tired by the end of our Hong Kong visit. We really did have plenty of free time in both countries. (01-07)

Study Tour of 2008

The first interviews of the 2008 cohort were conducted four months after the completion of their study tour, and have been previously reported (Weaver & Tucker 2010). Those interviews revealed two sub-groups of students: about half the cohort were highly distressed by the perceived lack of support from the accompanying staff, and suffered high levels of homesickness and anxiety, although they still reported benefits from the tour in their discipline understanding and employment options. The other half reported the opposite – they enjoyed the tour immensely, felt they received sufficient support from staff and were surprised by their peers’ reactions.

Although not all of the original interviewees could be contacted for re-interview two years later, representatives of both groups were contacted and agreed to participate in a second interview. Of the five re-interviewed, two students (02-08 and 07-08) had previously been completely positive about their tour experience, whereas the remaining three (03-08, 06-08 and 08-08) had reported quite negative experiences. This allowed direct comparison with earlier responses from the same individuals.

Responses are discussed under the same six categories, to allow comparison with earlier student cohorts. Typical comments from individual students were matched with responses from the same individuals in their initial interview, to allow longitudinal comparisons. The same questions were used for all interviews, so concerns about the phrasing of the questions potentially leading to a positive bias did not seem to be borne out, at least with this cohort of students.

Discipline-specific skills

In initial interviews, all students had responded positively about the impact they believed the study tour had had on their discipline-specific understanding, and illustrated this by citing specific examples of business visits or topics that interested them. In the subsequent interviews, this positive belief appeared strengthened, and students now appeared to take a more holistic view of how their discipline knowledge had changed. Example comments from both interviews are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Student responses about discipline-specific skills

| Interview Responses in 2008 | Interview Responses in 2010 |
|--|---|
| The tour was a microcosm of an intense learning environment. It was like a little pressure cooker – and so all skills were finely honed here. (02-08) | This was a brilliant experience, and the source of an immeasurable amount of knowledge for me, and some very complex issues were covered. I feel I can now discuss business at a much higher level – I am now confident to do this. (02-08) |
| Staffing seemed to be a big issue for the businesses – juggling expat versus local staff. Both raised different issues for the companies involved. I also learnt about the difference in regulatory issues, especially in communist countries. (07-08) | From an academic point of view – it helped to reinforce the finance and economics subject material – it was actually a good reinforcement of all my studies. (07-08) |
| It has expanded my awareness of business in different contexts – China and Vietnam are very different to Australia. (06-08) | I’ve since done more reading and interacting, so have built on my experience from the tour. The tour definitely sparked my interest, and made me aware that there are different contexts in all international arenas. (06-08) |

| | |
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| The [IT company] talk was way over my head.... so this one was a waste of time for me. The architect in China was great – he gave a lot of background about China – how Shanghai is being developed, and it was fascinating to learn about the cultural and traditional aspects of architecture. (08-08) | Yes, definitely. It made me much more aware of public affairs. I now wonder about the types of people and personalities who are attracted to and succeed in international business. (08-08) |
|--|---|

Employability and career options

In the latter interviews, all students believed that participation in the tour had had a positive impact on their career options, demonstrated either as improved employment options, or as consideration of the wider opportunities available to them now. This included students who were quite negative about the potential employment impact in 2008, as shown in the responses in Table 3.

Table 3: Student responses on their employability and career options

| Interview Responses in 2008 | Interview Responses in 2010 |
|---|---|
| I am focused now on new opportunities. I am working in my own business now, so am looking towards Asia, particularly Asians in Australia. (02-08) | [This was] one of the main subjects that gave me the most value – much more than any other subject, because of the holistic nature, it was across all the disciplines, and I could apply what I learnt to every other subject, and it impacts on lots of day-to-day interactions as well. (02-08) |
| HR is my area, but I got more of an understanding of the whole company challenges (especially in manufacturing), so feel I have more of an international outlook now. I will highlight this on my resume, under a new section I have added titled 'Achievements'. (03-08) | At my [placement] interview, I talked about the tour to China and Vietnam. My employer had a branch in China, so were very interested in what I'd done. This probably didn't get me the job by itself, but helped stand me apart from the others. (03-08) |
| I have already included my participation on the study tour in my resume, and in an interview. My new employers were very interested in this – I think they felt that I had more of a big-picture view. (06-08) | I wouldn't say that going on the tour helped me get my current job, but it has certainly helped me with aspects of this job, especially dealing with non-English-speaking stakeholders. (06-08) |
| I didn't see it as an achievement, as it was such a negative experience for me that I had not seen the positive aspect that prospective employers might see in this. (08-08) | It [the tour] was such a wonderful opportunity.... I did consider teaching English overseas, and might still do this when I have no more family commitments. (08-08) |

Generic skills

As in the earlier interviews, all students believed that their generic skills, particularly teamwork and communication skills, had improved from participating in the study tour, and they could now identify examples of how these skills would be applied in the workplace (Table 4).

Table 4: Student responses on their generic skills acquisition

| Interview Responses in 2008 | Interview Responses in 2010 |
|---|---|
| My teamwork skills also increased – the whole tour was very team-building over the two weeks, living and working with people I wouldn't normally mix with. We learnt each other's strengths etc. I think the quality of our final report improved as a result of this, which included how to work as a team. Just navigating the country as a larger group also improved my teamwork skills. (03-08) | Dealing with my team to get the final presentation done – we all had different priorities at that time, and different availability, so I had to learn how to deal with others. I had to get time off work to meet with colleagues, and if they hadn't prepared their part, I got frustrated. The same situation occurs in the workplace – people from different departments have different priorities etc., but they still have to work together as a team. You can't get angry and ruin the relationship – you need patience etc.(03-08) |
| We worked in a team of three, and I felt we succeeded in managing the team dynamics issues within our team. (07- | Part of the curriculum included a presentation, so that was a bonus for me. I hadn't done much public speaking |

| | |
|-----|---|
| 08) | before. Every bit of practice helps – it’s all cumulative growth. (07-08) |
|-----|---|

Personal development

Students who had previously reported a positive impact on their own personal development reiterated that belief, often citing the same examples to illustrate their responses. One student (08-08) who had previously claimed the tour had no impact on her personal development now believed her confidence with intercultural communication had improved (Table 5).

Table 5: Student responses on their personal development

| Interview Responses in 2008 | Interview Responses in 2010 |
|---|---|
| I feel I am more culturally literate as a result of this tour. This tour gave me the ability to know where to go for more information, especially in areas of cultural literacy – I now know where to go and what to do. (02-08) | It was a radical eye-opener for me to go overseas, so I can’t overestimate the impact it had on me. (02-08) |
| I don’t think I would have had trouble in a foreign country, but at the start of this tour I was shy, so I have definitely increased my confidence. I now know how to ask relevant questions, and how to delve more deeply. I was proud how well I survived for the two weeks – I am a very picky eater, so I did face personal challenges when eating out, but I learnt to cope. (03-08) | I was a bit shy before the tour – I was the youngest, and in the earlier years of my degree, while the others were finishing theirs, and were mature-age students. So I was very shy, and didn’t want to say much or to appear dumb. But on the tour, we each <i>had</i> to present, so I was forced to improve my communication skills, which helped to improve my confidence. (03-08) |
| No change really. I come from a background of mixing socially and at school with European migrant colleagues, so felt I was already experienced with different cultures and different accents. (08-08) | Yes, definitely improved in confidence. I now relate to local Vietnamese people much more easily; for example, I strike up conversations with people at the bus stop, especially the Vietnamese women. Prior to the tour, I wouldn’t have had the gumption to talk to strangers like that. (08-08) |

Interpersonal interactions

During the 2008 interviews, the greatest disparity in student responses arose in discussions around the role of the staff accompanying the tour, particularly in social interactions and support for students. This topic was raised by all students in interviews, without prompting or specific questions on this topic. Some students were highly distressed about this, whereas others were bewildered at their colleagues’ feelings. In the 2010 round of interviews (Table 6), those who had previously expressed negative feelings on the role of staff now either appreciated the encouragement to become more independent (for example, student 03-08), or had somewhat less negative emotions (student 08-08, who was the most distressed in the earlier interview). Students who were positive about the role of staff in 2008 did not even mention this topic specifically in 2010.

Table 6: Student responses on student and staff interactions

| Interview Responses in 2008 | Interview Responses in 2010 |
|--|--|
| From talking to other students – heard that most students didn’t like the level of support from staff, but this is not my view – I thought they were fantastic. I don’t want to be mollycoddled, or have my hand held. We should be able to self-manage by this stage. And we were not left alone – we always had our fellow students for support. (02-08) | We were away from home in an alien situation, so lots of pressure on everyone and on individuals. We had to apply our learning in those situations, so it was really intense. We could absorb everything so much more readily, so you don’t forget it, like in other subjects. |
| I think the main thing was that it was a bit hard to mix with the staff.... I would have liked more help on an academic level. | This tour makes you feel quite independent – staff are there to help, but not babysitting you. It’s more than just an academic experience, you have to manage your time, |

| | |
|--|--|
| Also, the staff did not join us for dinner or for our post-meeting coffee debriefs, but instead chose to isolate themselves. This reinforced the hierarchy of students/staff. I do feel that this was isolationist, not just encouraging independence amongst the students. (03-08) | and for example, fit in shopping etc. at night, but still have to be prepared for meetings the next day, write up after the meetings that day etc. So, you have to take responsibility for managing your time. (03-08) |
| I am very disappointed with the way the staff have handled this tour.... This was my final subject, and it has left a very sour taste. [Lecturer] has been a sort of mentor to me, which is why I applied for this unit, so I was disappointed not to be able to mix with her socially. I was very unhappy with the staff not being involved and not available. I felt very isolated.... There were lots of personal issues that the staff did not want to know about. (08-08) | I still think the tour leaders were on a junket, and feel they didn't want to be with the students. I think we had a great group [of students]. (08-08) |

Suggestions for improvement

In 2008, the most common suggestion for improving the tour was to advertise it more widely, so that more students could take advantage of the opportunity. This was again the major suggestion raised when students were re-interviewed in 2010 (Table 7).

Table 7: Student suggestions for improving the study tour

| Interview Responses in 2008 | Interview Responses in 2010 |
|--|--|
| I would have preferred a little longer in each city – perhaps 1.5 weeks in each. There was not as much sightseeing time as I would have liked, but of course, we were mainly there for the study tour. I missed one of the day tours that I would have really liked to go on, but I was too tired to go. | The only thing I would change is the length of time in each country – make this longer. It was insane how quickly we went through things – we had two or three business visits each day, and tried to fit in other activities. (06-08) |
| It was such a great opportunity and should be advertised more. Other students claimed not to have heard about it at all. (03-08) | For future trips – promote it more! Not many other students knew about this tour, and I only heard about it by word of mouth from a fellow student. I didn't see any advertising. (03-08) |

Discussion and Conclusions

This study has found that re-interviewing a cohort of students two years after participation in an international study tour produces more positive and fewer negative responses about students' perceptions of the tour's impact. In earlier interviews, all students had reported benefits from the tour in their discipline understanding and employment options, but about half of the small cohort of students had expressed high levels of stress about some aspects of their experience, particularly the pressures on them to be independent travelers (within a small supported team) in a foreign city. Interviews with two earlier cohorts had not revealed this anxiety, prompting the authors to contact the original study participants for re-interviews, after students had (mostly) entered the workforce, and were potentially in a better position to reflect on the full impact of their experiences.

In these later interviews, all students repeated their beliefs that their study tour experience led to greater discipline-based understanding (Table 2), although their responses revealed a shift over the two years, from discussing specific topics to a more holistic understanding of how international business operates.

All students now believed that their participation in the tour contributed to improved employment or career opportunities, but perhaps more importantly, several believed it encouraged them to consider different areas or opportunities they would not previously have considered. This is

reflected most markedly by student 08-08, who initially felt the tour was not of any value, but now believed it had opened her eyes to working internationally (Table 3).

All students reported in the initial interviews that they believed they had improved their generic academic skills, such as teamwork and communication; this belief was reiterated in the later interviews. They were all able to provide examples of how participation in the study tour had benefited them in their current professional lives (Table 4).

All students reported in the later interviews that they believed the study tour had a major impact on their confidence, both in their personal abilities and in communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. For most students, this was a reiteration of their earlier responses, albeit now illustrated with examples of how this had been demonstrated (Table 5). For student 08-08, this was a major change –initially this student had not believed that participating in the study tour had contributed at all to their personal development, but now believed that it had directly contributed to a significant increase in personal confidence.

The greatest disparity in student responses in the initial interviews was in the category of interpersonal relations, particularly between students and staff accompanying the tour. In the later interviews, this difference had largely disappeared, with only one student still expressing negative views on this topic, and even these views had ameliorated over the two-year interval (Table 6).

The final category of responses relates to suggestions to improve the study tour experience for future students. As with the initial interviews, most students preferred no change to the actual tour itself, but strongly encouraged wider participation from fellow students (Table 7), and suggested that the advertising and promotion of upcoming tours was the major area that needed significant improvement.

Again, the authors acknowledge that the wording of the interview questions is potentially leading to the positive, which may have skewed student responses somewhat. In hindsight, the questions should have been rephrased to use more neutral wording. However, the same wording was used for the original 2008 cohort, who provided a mixture of positive and strongly negative responses, so we are cautiously confident that at least the strongly negative feelings are being reported.

In summary, the preliminary findings of this longitudinal study reveal that many students may not appreciate the full impact of participation in such study tours until they have entered the workforce; yet institutions are under pressure to justify such programs with short-term evaluations that are unable to fully capture the long-term benefits.

Limitations of This Study

This study relies on students' perceptions of their learning outcomes, and does not attempt to measure actual outcomes (similar to Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004); thus, concerns about validity of self-reporting, particularly for responses on any change to discipline-based understandings, are justified.

This study was conducted with a very small cohort size, and hence small numbers of participants in the evaluation project. Although a response rate of 50% would be considered high in most studies, such a small cohort size in this study meant that the number of responses in this study is very low. Thus, only descriptive and qualitative indications can be drawn from our results, and

these findings can only be considered as preliminary. Quantitative data, such as responses to Likert-scale questions, would have strengthened the results and added more depth to the findings.

As has been mentioned above, concerns about the exact phrasing of the interview questions must be acknowledged, which might have led to different responses from students.

This study focused on students' experiences in our international study tour, so did not include comparisons with a control group of alumni, who did not participate in the tour, to determine if those students reported similar improvements in perceived confidence and competence. Such an investigation was considered outside the scope of this current study, but may be worth considering in the future.

Recommendations

The key recommendation arising from this study is to strongly suggest that institutions and educators take a longer view when evaluating programs, to allow time for students to fully appreciate the value of experiences. We followed the standard practice in most universities of evaluating programs within weeks of completion. For example, Tchaïcha and Davis (2010, p751) mention that it is a requirement of their college to administer evaluations of teaching within a month of students completing their international tour. Our results indicate that students may need years to fully appreciate the impact of such study-tour programs, and hence a longitudinal analysis may be required. Conducting evaluations with the study-tour alumni, while posing challenges of contacting past students, does provide evaluators with a more complete picture.

We would suggest adding a fourth stage to the three phases recommended by Porth (1997) as components of a successful international study tour. Porth's Phase 3 encompasses integration of learning together with feedback and evaluation from students. We argue that students may not be able to fully comprehend the impact from their participation until some years after completion; thus, we recommend that evaluation is separated into fourth phase, conducted with alumni of the program.

Additionally, we also recommend calling on past students or alumni who are in the work-force to help promote upcoming study tours. While we did use past students in our promotion, these students were only from the previous cohort, and still completing the final year of their study. Our results indicate that more credibility and passionate encouragement may be conveyed by those who have benefited substantially from participation in such study-tour programs (for example, with improved employment prospects).

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