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Study tours: enhancing the international mobility experience

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing world, students, who are the future entrepreneurs, consultants, and diplomats, must adapt and become global in their outlook. This can only be achieved if they have teachers who are international in their approach to teaching and are familiar with the world.

This paper looks at a number of student study tours that have been operating in Thailand and examines some of the different approaches that are taken to enhance the educational experience. While the focus is primarily on visits from New Zealand and Australia to Thailand, a number of general conclusions may be drawn from this. The prospect of internationalization is also viewed from the perspective of the host country.

Although not proposing any ideal model, hopefully the findings will provide some useful indicators for any individual or institution involved in the organization of educational study tours and lead to ways in which the experience can be enhanced for participants.

Keywords: internationalization, overseas study tours, education, culture, university, Thailand, New Zealand, Australia

Introduction

Overseas study tours are but one element of international education. In Europe or America, this is often referred to as transnational education or crossing borders. However, for Australia and New Zealand, both being island nations, students must travel overseas. This distinction suggests that such travel is more difficult than simply crossing a border, which it is. However, it also implies that

Australia and New Zealand are more isolated due to their geography and thus in greater need to expose their students to the overseas experience.

While governments might put forward political, strategic or economic rationale for this exposure, the real benefit to the student is socio-cultural with visible growth in their own personal development or maturity as (usually) young adults entering a globalised world.

From the literature is clear that very little has been written from the host country perspective on study tours or exchange, outside of the mainstream European and North American experience. What do the hosts stand to gain and why should they involve their time and effort in such activities? Having foreign students on campus makes the university more attractive for local students and it also provides an opportunity for intercourse with foreigners as “equals”, which might otherwise be rare. So too is the status of the host university enhanced. Rightly or wrongly, local students feel more comfortable about their choice of institution, being reassured by the very presence of foreigners. Faculty in the host university are confronted with “liberal” [1], students who have been raised to question and this could be beneficial, even if it only results in slight change in the lecturer’s attitude towards teaching. If the foreign students are actively engaged in a local project it can bring fresh ideas and different perspectives. Should local students be preparing themselves for further study abroad, this provides a good opportunity for initial interaction, albeit within the cultural safety of their own environment. And let us not forget that cultural experience and learning is a two way street. Both parties are involved in international activity.

With increasing internationalization, one could argue that foreign students have more opportunities for interacting with different cultures on their own campus, as well as in the broader multi-cultural community. A number of studies have shown however, that this does not occur, at least not to the desired degree [2, 3]. Asian students in Australia and New Zealand often encounter difficulty in establishing relationships or making friends [4, 5]. It is logical to argue that this problem is more likely to be diminished if their fellow students had some experience of their Asian culture. This would be of direct benefit to the host universities who are in the business of attracting international students. Prospective employers also have an interest in internationalization with exporting and multinational companies actively seeking international experience in their recruitment [5].

Modern students are also demanding more from their educational experience and wish to play a “*more active role in their own learning*” [6]. Education is moving further way from the classroom as students adopt information technology and seek to practice and apply their acquired knowledge. An overseas study tour, as a regular, well planned activity, provides one opportunity to make courses more interesting and attractive for students. Pariola [6], suggests that universities should be looking at the value of experience rather than just course materials. Woolf sees it as exploding the classroom, so that “*the foreign landscape itself becomes the classroom*” [1].

Educational study tours to foreign countries have been undertaken for some time now as a means of enhancing the educational experience. The latest figures suggest roughly 5% of Australian students manage to undertake an international experience [7]. However, the degree to which such undertakings are successful depends to a large extent on the teachers understanding and support for such activities. This includes teachers at both the home and the host university. Ultimately, teachers are the key to success in any internationalization of tertiary institutes [8]. Wilson [9], suggests that cross-cultural experience through educational study tours should also be a significant part of teacher

education. This is supported by Toncar and Cudmore [10], who found that overseas study tours or internships for business students were also ultimately beneficial to faculty, the school and future employers. Further strong support for this idea comes from Taylor [11] who charged that teachers must understand the world and that their education should not be simply composed of courses in foreign cultures.

The dichotomy in internationalization for Australia and New Zealand is acute. In 2005, 42% of Australian students heading overseas undertook their experience in Europe, while 23% opted for North America. 26% went to Asia, of which 7% was Southeast Asia. In the same year, 84% of international students undertaking higher education in Australia came from Asia. Conversely, only 7% came from Europe and 4% from the Americas [7]. Similar figures apply in New Zealand, with 85% of foreign students coming from Asia [4, 12] whereas, in contrast to Australia, 53% of New Zealand students choose Asia as their preferred destination [5]. While the logical argument has been put forward that language is the deciding factor for students heading to Europe and America [13], this should be viewed with some caution. If language is the key factor in choice, then why are there not more Europeans and North Americans heading to Australia? Even though we would strongly suggest any international experience is beneficial, it does seem a shame that Australia does not encourage more of this experience to be undertaken with her near neighbours in Asia, clearly the current and future market for Australian goods and services and clearly more relevant in terms of future peace and understanding. One could argue that a greater focus on Asia would do much to help Asian students feel more at home in Australia.

A number of universities have enshrined the international or cultural experience in stone. In his editorial, Stone provides a very comprehensive set of goals for institutions to adopt as appropriate to their particular needs [14, see Table 1], while the University of South Australia take this one step further by awarding points for each type of activity under their Global Experience program [15]. Curtin University, as but one example, has included this as part of their nine attributes for students:

“International perspective: Think globally and consider issues from a variety of perspectives; apply international standards and practices within a discipline or professional area.”

“Cultural understanding: Respect individual human rights; recognize the importance of cultural diversity, particularly the perspective of Indigenous Australia; value diversity of language.”[16].

It is interesting to note from this example the hypothesis that, imbued with a sense of cultural diversity as a result of overseas experience, students might become more understanding towards indigenous Australians. Presumably parallels could be drawn for the New Zealand Maori.

Swinburne University also award points for their business students undertaking overseas experience, with three forms of assessment:

1. Pre-departure research and preparation worth 30%.
2. Students are required to complete an on-tour test worth 20% of the overall assessment.
3. Students are required to complete a 3,000 word project on a theme relevant to Asia and the Study Tour. The value of this assessment is 50% of the overall assessment.

Study tours come in many shapes and forms, usually recognized by the proportions of formal to informal and, of particular importance, whether or not students receive credit for their effort. Even with tours that do not include credit, it is important that the experiences are given *recognition* [7]. In some obvious cases, such as language study, it would make sense to imbed the overseas experience as part of the course. In others, due perhaps to the limitations of numbers, it be more practical to confine the group to students who have both the desire and a clearly defined overseas project. The overriding factor is flexibility, required from both the home and the host. Woolf suggests the key subject in any international experience is “abroad” itself and that “*what students should anticipate (and practitioners should create) is some study of the culture and society of the host country.*” [1]. It seems a fairly common practice in North America to bundle study tours as “service” [6], with all its missionary baggage and the inevitable question of who benefits the most. While this is rare in Australia or New Zealand it has been adopted to some extent by RMIT, particularly for their programs in Vietnam [17].

Some tours are loosely structured, some are much more formal. There is often a different mix of academic or project time coupled with cultural experience and/or leisure time. Duration seems to be determined more by available time or semester timetables at either the home or the host institution, rather than any attempt to determine how long is required to gain maximum benefits for the participants. Some tours are organized formally by the university, some by the school or faculty and others by dedicated individual educators. Some programs may also include an element of workplace learning, thus adding value to the study tour. Unfortunately these are usually confined to English-speaking destinations [18]. There are many different models, all of which include some elements of; purpose, discipline, duration, number of participants, partner institution(s), program mix, credit or non-credit, cost and evaluation.

It should also be noted that the study tour experience, at least in the case of New Zealand and Australia, is largely confined to undergraduates, making up 95% of students involved in international programs in 2005 [7]. However, this should not be assumed where the host country is involved in any reciprocal exchange. Mostly due to language issues, maturity and other concerns, it is often more practical for masters students from countries like Thailand to undertake international education experience. Olsen also goes on to point out that in 2005, short-term programs (incl. study tours) made up 25% of all international study experiences [7].

There are quite a number of dedicated academics in Australia and New Zealand who quietly rise to the challenge and personal investment required in organizing overseas study tours, often without recognition from their own institutions. In most cases they have been bitten by the experience themselves and simply wish to see the development such experience will bring to their own students.

Massey University Experience

New Zealand is a country that never ceases to surprise and to excel. For all the rhetoric coming from Australian universities promoting internationalization in 2001 there were no Australian students undertaking an international experience in New Zealand and only three from New Zealand in Australia [5]. New Zealand offers a very culturally diverse experience, particularly through its indigenous population and it would be folly to suggest that there is nothing for Australians to learn from that country.

When Australia and New Zealand were excluded from favourable trading arrangements with the UK due to the formation of the European Common Market, New Zealand was quicker to adapt and respond, particularly in the area of food produce, an important area for both countries. New Zealand lamb, dairy products and fruit were soon on the supermarket shelves of Asia. The successful marketing strategy for the kiwifruit is but one example, taking an Asian fruit back to Asia. So it should come as no surprise that study tours to Asia include students of horticulture. Parallels could be drawn with the tropical fruit industry in Australia however, we are unaware of any universities taking the initiative in this area.

Massey University have been conducting educational study tours in Thailand for over six years, usually for a period of two weeks, and sometimes involving up to 40 students. According to Warrington [19], the inclusion of universities, rural towns, temples, historical sites, tourist centres, as well as urban exposure, provides an appreciation of conditions in Thai universities and Thai society in general. Cultural exposure requires going beyond the urban centres and a good Thai partner can be vital in achieving this. The New Zealand students are undergraduates in horticulture so they are afforded the opportunity to see both a market country and a producing country. It would appear that Massey have found a unique niche in carefully tailoring their study tour program that will bring benefits to the country for generations to come and will help New Zealanders become global players in the employment market.

One of the key partners for Massey is the Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) who, through their six campuses in the fruit growing north of Thailand, provide an ideal introduction and local umbrella for the study tour. RMUTL staff are enthusiastic in their welcome of the foreign students and reciprocal exchanges (usually involving staff) are made.

Curtin University Experience

The School of Business Law and Taxation has arranged study tours to Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia “*to assist the students in developing an intercultural and international perspective*” [20]. Such tours provide exposure for students to the international aspects of business, law and taxation. The learning experience is the focus of the program and, as suggested by Bodger [21], educational institutions are more likely to arrange a meaningful program than commercial tour companies. For the future, the School hopes to introduce scholarships for study tours based on academic performance.

The tour to Thailand comprising 26 students included Bangkok and Chonburi, with a key partner institution being the Asian University. In just over a week, the tour encompassed Australians working in Thailand, the Central Group, Boonrawd Brewery, the Laem Chabang Port Authority and the Ford-Mazda factory.

Considerable effort went into briefing prior to departure as well as the provision of kits, including maps and other basic information. On-going review and feedback was also a feature that Curtin has since enhanced in subsequent tours.

According to Price [20], who accompanied the tour to Thailand, most of the participants “*felt that they learnt more in this unit than in previous units and believe this is purely due to the immersive form of learning which is more interesting and interactive than the lecture style of learning*”. The

students interacted with people at many different levels on this study tour; people that they would not normally have the opportunity to interact with on campus or in Australia.

One of the key features of the Curtin experience is a deliberate focus on teamwork, reflected in assignments during the tour, in addition to individual improvement. The Curtin approach also features a large degree of self reliance in terms of transport and, sometimes, accommodation on the ground, whereas Melbourne tended to rely more on the host organisation for this. Basically it is a matter of cost and the desired degree of independence.

It was also interesting to note from student feedback that they rated their interaction with other students very highly at 9/10. As Price observes, *"This is important in the Bachelor of Commerce as it can be difficult for students to form relationships on campus. In particular one of the students on the tour was an international student from Hong Kong, he had been at Curtin for over a year and had not been able to make any friends until he attended the study tour"* [20].

Melbourne University Experience

The author was fortunate to be directly involved in a series of study tours to Thailand from the University of Melbourne during the 1990's. These were a joint initiative of the Department of Chemical Engineering and the Development Technologies Centre and were an annual event involving mostly final year chemical engineering students. The host organisation was King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT).

One month was considered optimum for Thailand and each student were given a specific project to complete in that time, for which they received credit or recognition. KMUTT was a good choice of partner as it had extensive networks in mostly rural areas of Thailand. Students were able to select projects that might involve an industrial scale solar dryer in Buriram, to a fluidized bed combustion unit in Chiang Rai. This provided for unique cultural opportunities.

Although often predetermined by budget, the length of the tour is also an important consideration to enable sufficient exposure to the foreign culture as well as to gain academic benefit. Costs on this program were also significantly lower as students were required to find their own airfares, while all in-country costs were met by the host institution as part of a larger exchange program with the Development Technologies Centre. Competition for places was high and only the best selected. As a result, Melbourne undergraduate students were partnered with Thai master's students for greater compatibility and ease of English conversation. It is estimated that some 70% of participants have subsequently returned to Thailand on private visits to follow-up on the friendships established during the tours. Some have made multiple visits, many are now working outside of Australia.

The one month was intense and the final project reports had to be defended before a group representing both the home and the host university. However, on completion of this defence, students were released for one week to become tourists at their own expense and their own choice of destination. Having already formed homogeneous groups during the work phase, most stayed together for the tourist activities. The week also allowed the Australian supervisors the opportunity to interact with Thai students they may be co-supervising, undertake guest lecturing and to visit other universities on behalf of Melbourne.

The best indicator of the strength of this program was that competition for places became more intense every year.

While all indicators were otherwise positive, some difficulties were encountered with KMITT facilitators finding enough time to mentor the Australian students on their projects. This was an organisational problem. The differences in the educational systems in the two countries need to be recognized as term breaks in the northern hemisphere can be quite different to Australia and it is unrealistic to expect the Thai counterpart to be able to handle an influx of Australian students during, say, exam time. In Thailand, for example, Christmas is considered a normal working day.

Unfortunately the program ran into a period of cutbacks to academic funding in Australia as well as changes in key staff at the faculty level. Being regarded as extraneous it was probably ahead of its time and internationalization had yet to become a catch phrase. One of the major weaknesses of the program was that KMITT could not come up with equivalent numbers to undertake the reciprocal tour to Australia. The cost of airfares were clearly more of a burden to Thai students than their Australian counterparts and the need to have sufficient English capability to hit the ground running was a drawback for some. Added to this is the unfortunate fact of the Thai government system where overseas study opportunities are highly competitive and a study tour to Australia might be at the expense of an opportunity for more formal study abroad at a later occasion, rather than being viewed as a stepping stone.

Towards the final years of the program Melbourne experimented with a broader range of students outside of engineering and at the same time KMITT acted more as a placement service to include other Thai universities in an expanded network. These were all positive signs of might have been.

Review and Benefits

Finite benefits and outcomes are difficult to measure when personal development of the individual is one of the targets. There are many intangible benefits from an overseas study tour. However, Williams insists that, with the use of a pre-test and a post-test, some elements such as intercultural adaptability and intercultural sensitivity can in fact be measured [22]. It seems to be the practice that most home universities develop their own methods for evaluating study tours, some more stringent than others. The inclusion of a specific project provides one means of measuring the work undertaken.

More difficult to measure is the appreciation students can attain for their own country and culture as a result of overseas exposure. The Australian airline Qantas perhaps sums this up with their media campaign, travel...*“but still call Australia home.”* Woolf also makes the point that overseas experience helps students learn about their home culture, *“US study-abroad students paradoxically learn most about being an American when they leave the comfort of their own shores.”* [1]. Grusky describes this as being *“not so much a life-enriching but rather a complacency-shattering experience.”* [23]. In a University of Ohio study Hutchins [24] investigated the impact of overseas study tours on international, global and inter-cultural perspectives of the student. The study found that important factors relating to success included the maturity of the student and the geographic location of the chosen country. It has also been suggested that such tours are not simply a one-off

experience with limited gains. Kollar and Ailinger [25] found that, in the case of nursing students, study tours provided long-term benefits for the students.

Stone provides some useful indicators that could in turn be used to measure the effectiveness of an overseas study experience. At the very least they are recommended as a useful guide for any institution contemplating establishing an international program [26].

A number of studies suggest that total immersion in the foreign culture is neither desirable nor achievable and that being a “*participant observer*” is the more successful approach [1]. A delicate balance between “participant” and “observer” is required to achieve this. Preconceived notions about the host country need to be cross-examined in the lead up prior to departure, coupled with the expectations of the student as to what they think they will learn. “*Reinforcing stereotypes of the host country is a risk inherent in all international study programs, particularly when those programs occur in so-called developing areas, and particularly when they are short in duration.*” [6]. This would seem to indicate that humility might be one desirable prerequisite when screening potential participants.

It is also clearly beneficial if students undertake some reading assignments prior to departure, with a view to developing a basic appreciation of the history, culture, religion, politics, geography and economics of the host country. Some concept of the relationship of the host country with their own might also be helpful. Including someone from the host country in any pre-departure briefing can also add value, if only to respond to questions. The question arose during selection for some tours of the inclusion of an Asian or even a Thai student in the group. The view from Thailand at the time was that it would be defeating the objectives of the program somewhat to bring a Thai to Thailand. Conversely, the initial Melbourne tour included an Australian-born Chinese who proved to be perhaps the best participant of all.

To maximize the benefits of study tours it is a good practice to undertake review on a daily basis. This is best achieved in an informal setting (such as after dinner, or while on the road). Each individual should be given the opportunity to refer to their daily notes and group comment and discussion encouraged. This might be supplemented by a more formal weekly summary that could desirably include the host. However, the important issue is that faculty accompanying the students have constant feedback and can help guide the students on the right path. For success, faculty cannot maintain the same relationship with the students that they might normally have in the home country. During the study tour it should be more informal and ideally based around “*experiencing together*”. One example of why this might be important occurred when the author was mentoring the first group of Melbourne University students in Bangkok. Soon after arrival a number of participants expressed the desire to visit Patpong (stereotypes coming through). They were asked to wait until they had completed their orientation and the mentor was free to take them. With all the impatience of youth they pressed for directions and the correct bus to catch, just in case the mentor became entangled in other work. The next day, 10 very shame-faced students revealed over breakfast how they had dressed in their finest and boarded the No. 75 in front of the university, only to find that the bus went around the first corner and pulled to a halt at the depot. They had caught the bus on the wrong side of the road. And they had learnt something.

Conclusion

Australia needs to get closer to Asia and reverse the imbalance in education exchange. Many positive steps have already been taken, particularly with the increased emphasis on Asian languages and history at most levels of education. Both Australia and New Zealand need to look at cultural issues on campus and how to make their large Asian contingent feel more welcome. A greater focus on study tours for ANZ students to Asia may be one answer. Certainly there are more gains to be had than losses.

While governments and their programs tend to focus on countries and bureaucracies, universities are in a unique position to focus on people. Many study tours are one result of personal relationships and trust built up over time. They are guaranteed a better chance of success when the ideals of both parties are similar. Internationalization needs to be a win-win for both parties involved. In planning for study tours, careful consideration should be given to niche opportunities, as illustrated by the Massey example and the up-country opportunities afforded to the Melbourne students.

ANZ universities with campuses in Asia would appear to have an advantage when organising study tours, particularly in terms of accommodation and logistics on the ground. However, care needs to be taken that these are not simply safe havens or colonial outposts that in fact restrict access to the real society or culture, or create a false impression of same. It can also have a restrictive effect on the choice of destination. An alternative might be to explore new fields that might one day in the future lead to new campuses as a result of the relationships established. There is a danger, particularly for Australian institutes, of carving up Asia into their own little fiefdoms.

A major investment in planning is the key to the successful study tour. Stone gives perhaps the best definition; *“practical enterprises that have clearly defined beneficial student learning outcomes”*. [14]. We would only add that the teachers and the institutes they represent can also be beneficiaries. It is critical to have a good partner in the host country, to involve them early in the planning and to give due recognition to their needs as well. The ideal relationship is built around more than just an annual influx of students for a month. With the advent of more international programs in Thai universities there is now greater scope for guest lecturers and ANZ postgraduate students undertaking field work in Asia. Co-supervision, joint research, reciprocal hosting of conferences are other areas worth exploring. These can all be built around a successful study tour program.

Finally, having viewed educational study tours from both the home and the host perspective, it is apparent that both Australia and New Zealand should be proud of the quality of youth they select for such tours. Benefits, both tangible and intangible, are clear not just for the students, but for the home and host staff and institutes, and ultimately the countries they represent. Hopefully there will be more of this type of activity to come and, rather than fall victim to study tour fatigue and budget cuts, dedicated organisers will continue to find innovative ways to enrich the student experience. If any education professionals remain unconvinced, perhaps the following will help:

“I’ve often wondered how history might have been different if President Johnson had just studied overseas for a year or two on a Fulbright fellowship.” Former US Senator William Fulbright, 1979.

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