


January 2006

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Recommended Citation

Van Hoof, Hubert B. (2006) "Searching for the Holy Grail of International Education: Feedback from Hospitality Management Study Abroad Participants," *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

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Abstract

This article reports on a study done among hospitality management students who participated in study abroad programs between January 2001 and May 2003. The participants in the study were both incoming students to the US and outgoing students from the US. The study investigates, among other things, why they had decided to study abroad, why they had selected a particular institution, how their home institution compared to the partner institution abroad, and what they perceived to be the benefits and relevance of their international experiences. It was found that respondents were generally very positive about the study abroad experience. Some interesting differences of opinion were found when the perceptions of the incoming students were compared to those of the outgoing students. The results of this study may be of particular interest to hospitality management administrators and faculty who create and administer international exchange programs.

Keywords

Hubert Van Hoof, Asia, Higher Education

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By Hubert B. Van Hoof

This article reports on a study done among hospitality management students who participated in study abroad programs between January 2001 and May 2003. The participants in the study were both incoming students to the US and outgoing students from the US. The study investigated, among other things, why they had decided to study abroad, why they had selected a particular institution, how their home institution compared to the partner institution abroad, and what they perceived to be the benefits and relevance of their international experiences. It was found that respondents were generally very positive about the study abroad experience. Some interesting differences of opinion were found when the perceptions of the incoming students were compared to those of the outgoing students. The results of this study may be of particular interest to hospitality management administrators and faculty who create and administer international exchange programs.

Introduction

As educators and administrators involved in study abroad programs we are constantly searching for the holy grail of international education, the perfect study abroad experience. Many of us have studied and written about the value of an international experience in higher education, and generally it was found that a mandatory or optional international component in a four-year program of studies is of benefit to our students, not only for developmental and educational reasons, but also because it helps them adjust to the challenges of life in the workplace once they leave college. See, for example, H. De Wit, 1997; E. Roberts 1998; C. Stangor, K. Jonas, W. Stroebe, and M. Hewstone, 1994; H. Van Hoof, 1999, 2000, and 2001.

What does the perfect study abroad experience look like from our perspective? First, we would like our students to have the ideal academic experience. This means not only that they acquire relevant and up-to-date knowledge in the subjects of their choice, but also that there is a perfect fit between what they study abroad and what they are taught at their home institutions. We would like for credits to transfer easily because the host institutions abroad teach what their syllabi say they are supposed to teach, and for course contents abroad to be comparable to course contents at our own institutions.

Second, we would like our students to have the perfect personal experience, one that enriches them, and helps them mature. If they can handle life as an exchange student at an institution abroad, and deal with the inevitable hurdles while living in another country and culture, they can deal with any challenges in their future careers as general managers, marketing directors, controllers, or food and beverage directors. See, for example, D. Lawson, D. White, and S. Dimitriadis, 1998; N.C. Frisch, 1990.

We would like our students to have the perfect cultural experience. They should come back as culturally sensitive individuals who will not only survive in an increasingly multi-cultural environment but flourish in it too. They should be familiar with people of different race, color, language and beliefs. They should be able to consider things from multiple perspectives, and, more than anything, they should be tolerant and appreciative of diversity related issues in the workplace.

We would like our students to have the perfect social experience. Housing at the host institution should be arranged ahead of time, and should reflect the needs and

wishes of our students. They should have many friends while abroad, and come back with lifelong contacts around the globe, so that they always have a place to stay no matter where they travel later on in life. They should travel and see something of the world first hand, while learning from the experience.

Unfortunately, however, we have not found this holy grail of international education yet, and our students will probably never have a perfect, flawless experience. Some might argue that the experience should not be flawless, as students learn from overcoming challenges. Yet, we keep trying to make the study abroad experience better every semester, not only for the students who leave home to go abroad, but also for those who come to us from other countries, and we try to improve academically, as well as with regard to housing, social contacts, transportation, safety issues, and cultural exposure.

Besides that, we are constantly looking for new ways of enticing our students to study abroad. We find new exchange partners in countries where we have never had programs before, and we offer them semester programs, year-long programs, double degree programs and international internships. We send faculty abroad, and ask international faculty to come and teach in our programs, all in an effort to make our international programs as appealing as possible. And still we keep searching...

When we review our academic programs and the courses we teach, in our efforts to make them better and more relevant to our students, one of the tools we use is the course evaluation. This is generally conducted at the end of the semester, and the input received is of vital importance to faculty, in that it helps them determine what worked and what did not, at least according to the students. The results of the evaluations are also important to programs in general, as they provide administrators with information on the effectiveness of their entire faculty, on how a program prepares students for life after school, and on how courses relate, interconnect or overlap.

Study abroad programs can benefit from student evaluations just as much. The information obtained from asking study abroad participants about their experiences will tell us how these programs fit in with our own academic mission, and will provide us with additional information that is vital for the long-term success of our international efforts. Moreover, we will learn how relevant the students felt the experience was to their personal development and their careers of choice, and how close we are to making the experience a perfect one.

This article reports on a study designed to illicit student feedback on the study abroad programs at Northern Arizona University (NAU), in a format reminiscent of regular course evaluations. Its specific intent was to investigate what students saw as the biggest benefits and challenges of the experience, why they decided to go abroad, how the education they received abroad compared to that at their home institution, and what the relevance of the experience was to their personal and professional development.

Methodology

Survey covers both incoming and outgoing exchange students

The survey which provided the data for the study was conducted during the months of March, April and May 2003. The population under study was all the hospitality management students who had participated in study abroad programs during the period of January 2001 to May 2003. Included were students who had left NAU to study at a partner institution abroad as well as those who came to NAU from a number of foreign countries and partner institutions. Not included in the survey were international students pursuing a four-year degree at NAU. Personal information (name and e-mail address) of these students was obtained from the data base of students at the International Office at Northern Arizona University.

Design and data collection keep student population in mind

The questionnaire which provided the data for this study was designed to gain insights into the perceptions of students about their study abroad experiences. As stated earlier, its intent was to provide the administrators and faculty involved in these programs with information that could help them in creating better programs and more worthwhile experiences.

It was decided to use a Web-based survey format in this study. The primary reason for doing so was that it could be distributed to a large target audience at a much lower cost and more quickly than a traditional mail-out survey. Moreover, data collection and conversion could be done automatically, and the target audience could be encouraged to participate by means of a personal e-mail message. The most important benefit, however, was the convenience for both the respondents and the researchers. These issues are addressed by, for example, M.P. Couper, 2000; D.R. Schaefer, and D. A. Dillman, 1998; A.M. Schonland, and P.W. Williams, 1996; and, A. C. Tse, 1998. In particular, the researcher felt that the respondents in this particular age group would be more likely to respond to an electronic format than to any of the other more traditional survey tools. An important concern about Web surveys is their low response rate. Yet, in this case, the population under study was relatively small, and it was anticipated that these students would be interested in sharing their opinions about their international experiences.

The questionnaire was a four-page, self-administered instrument. It was estimated that it would take respondents about ten minutes to complete, as many of the questions were closed-ended, requiring a choice from a number of alternatives presented.

In the first part of the survey the respondents were asked to provide some basic demographic information. They were asked to provide information about their gender, the country where they had studied, the institution they had studied at, their academic status (freshman, sophomore etc.), their major at the home institution and at their exchange institution, and the duration of their stay abroad.

The second part of the survey was divided into six sections and examined the students' perceptions about their international experiences. In the first section, two questions asked them what their reasons were for studying abroad, and why they had selected the institution in particular. They were then asked to rate their exchange programs (as compared to their home institution) on a five-point Likert scale with regard to 1. academics; 2. care for their general needs as students; 3. housing arrangements; and 4. overall levels of organization and structure at the exchange institution as perceived by the student.

The third section examined what they liked most and least about their exchange institution, and what they perceived to be the main differences between studying at home and abroad. Three questions (once again on a five-point scale) in the fourth section then asked them to rate the perceived relevance of their semester abroad to future job opportunities, their academic program at home, and their own personal development.

The fifth section contained four questions. The first two asked the respondents if they would consider studying abroad again at the same institution, and if they would study abroad again at another institution if it were possible. After that, they rated the quality of the academic program abroad specifically, and the overall study abroad experience in general. The final section asked them to describe the greatest benefits and challenges of studying abroad. This was done in an open-ended format.

On March 7, 2003 a letter signed by both the director of the International Office at NAU and the researcher was sent to all 136 incoming and outgoing hospitality management students in the database of the International Office at NAU who had participated in an exchange program during the January 2001- May 2003 period. In the letter the students were asked for their cooperation, and directed to a web-site which contained the survey. One week later, 26 respondents had completed the survey on-line. On March 24, 2003 a reminder was sent out to non-respondents. The web-site with the survey was kept open until the end of the Spring 2003 semester, May 9, 2003. At that time, a total of 48 students had responded to the survey, a 35.29% response rate. Given the concern that web-based surveys generally tend to generate a low response rate, this was deemed a good result.

Limitations exist

The main limitation to this study is that it was based solely on a database of students at one school at one university. All the incoming students studied at the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University and all the outgoing students went to the institutions that were part of the international network of the school. Opinions therefore say more about Northern Arizona University and its foreign partners than about other universities and their partners, and the results cannot be generalized beyond the scope of the study. They might, however, be indicative of student opinions across the US.

A second limitation was the small size of the sample, which was attributed primarily to the small population it was drawn from. Finally, there was the issue of the quality of the academic e-mail addresses: as students move on in their careers their e-mail addresses expire or messages are never read.

This article will first discuss the demographic data, and look at the descriptive results of the analyses. After that, it will look at the outcomes of various comparative analyses and describe whether any observed differences between various groups of students in the sample (males/females, incoming/outgoing) were significant. Finally, it will summarize some of the predominant opinions about the benefits and challenges of studying abroad and offer some suggestions for future research. All quantitative analyses were done using SPSS 11.0.

Results

Of the 48 students who responded to the survey, 33 (68.8%) were female, and 15 (31.2%) were male. These numbers are reflective of a trend observed in international education, where females in these kinds of structured programs tend to outnumber males by a considerable margin. Fourteen students (29.2%) were incoming and studied at NAU, and 34 students (73.8%) had spent a semester abroad. The incoming students came from Belgium, China, Germany and the Netherlands, and the outgoing students had studied at universities in Australia, Germany, Mexico, The Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. These locations were primarily driven by what was available in the School's international exchange network, although several students indicated they had found their country and institution of choice through USAC.

Most of the respondents were either juniors (25.0%) or seniors (66.7%), reflecting a common trend not to send students abroad too early in their academic careers. Finally, 29 respondents (60.4%) had studied abroad for only one semester, and 19 (39.6%) participants had been abroad for two semesters or longer (See Table 1).

Table 1:

Student Demographics (N=48)

GENDER	N	Valid %
Male	15	31.2%
Female	33	68.8%
STUDY LOCATION	N	Valid %
Incoming (to US)	14	29.2%
Outgoing (from US)	34	70.8%
ACADEMIC STATUS	N*	Valid %
Sophomore	4	8.3%
Junior	12	25.0%
Senior	32	66.7%
DURATION*	N	Valid %
One semester	29	60.4%
Two semesters	15	31.3%
Three or more semesters	4	8.3%

In the first section of the survey, the respondents were asked why they had decided to study abroad, and were requested to rank a number of distinctly different reasons in order of importance. The three most important reasons for studying abroad in general were:

1. It is/was a good opportunity to travel;
2. It is/was a good opportunity to live in another culture;
3. I liked the country my exchange program was located in;
It could be used as part of my degree program (tie).

When asked why they had selected a particular institution abroad, the three most important reasons were:

1. It was available as a partner at my home institution;
2. I liked the country it was located in;
3. People I know also go/went there.

Respondents compare home and host institutions

In four questions the survey then asked the respondents to compare the institution they had studied at abroad to their home institution in the areas of academics, care for their personal needs as a student, housing, and organization/structure. They did this on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being "Much Worse/Much Easier", 3 being "Same," and 5 being "Much Better/Much More Difficult." This scale was primarily used to allow for comparative analysis of opinions later.

Half the respondents (50.0%), regardless of their origins, felt that the academic program they had participated in abroad was more difficult than the program at their home institution, 17.4% felt that it was the same, and 32.6% considered it easier or much easier. The mean rating of 3.15 was close to the middle of the five-point scale (See Table 2).

In terms of the care they received for their personal needs (such as staff availability, academic advising, and counseling for instance) the respondents were considerably less impressed with their host institutions abroad: 17.4% of the respondents rated it as much worse, 26.1% felt it was worse, and 23.9% felt it was the same. Only 10.9% rated it as better, and 21.7% thought it was much better than the care they received at home. In this case the mean rating was 2.93 (See Table 2).

Housing abroad is always a major concern for students and their parents/caregivers. The overall sentiment was that housing arrangements abroad were

slightly better than they were at home, with 50.0% of the respondents feeling that the housing arrangements at the institutions abroad were better or much better than at home, 15.9% of the sample stating they were the same, and only 34.1% feeling they were worse or much worse than at their home institution. The mean rating of 3.18 reflected these generally positive sentiments (See Table 2).

Finally, when asked how they felt about the overall level of structure and organization at their exchange institutions as compared to their home institution, the respondents were clearly least impressed: only 28.3% rated it as better or much better, 21.7 % felt it was the same, and 50.0% thought it was worse or much worse than at home. The mean rating of 2.70 was the lowest score obtained (See Table 2).

Table 2
Student Assessment of Academic Difficulty, Care, Housing and Organization:
Exchange Institution Compared to Home Institution

Academic Level of Difficulty: Exchange Program Compared to Home	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating:3.15
Much Easier	3	6.5%	
Easier	12	26.1%	
Same	8	17.4%	
More Difficult	21	45.7%	
Much More Difficult	2	4.3%	
Level of Care for your Personal Needs: Exchange Program Compared to Home	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating: 2.93
Much Worse	8	17.4%	
Worse	12	26.1%	
Same	11	23.9%	
Better	5	10.9%	
Much Better	10	21.7%	
Housing Arrangements: Exchange Program Compared to Home	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating: 3.18
Much Worse	2	4.5%	
Worse	13	29.5%	
Same	7	15.9%	
Better	19	43.2%	
Much Better	3	6.8%	
Overall Level of Structure: Exchange Program Compared to Home	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating: 2.70
Much Worse	12	26.1%	
Worse	11	23.9%	
Same	10	21.7%	
Better	5	10.9%	
Much Better	8	17.4%	

*Total N does not make 48 because of missing values for the variable

Students think study abroad experience is very relevant

Three questions asked the respondents to rate the relevance of their international experiences to future job opportunities, to the academic program they were enrolled in at their home institution, and to their own personal development. Ratings were on a five-point scale again, with 1 being "Completely Irrelevant," 3 being "Relevant," and 5 being "Extremely Relevant."

When asked about the relevance of the experience to future job opportunities, 58.5% of the respondents rated it as very or extremely relevant, 36.6% rated it as relevant, and only 4.9% felt it was irrelevant (Mean rating 3.80) (See Table 3). With regard to the relevance of the international experience to their academic program at home, 46.3% of the respondents considered it very or extremely relevant, 41.5% felt it was relevant, and 12.2% thought it was irrelevant (Mean rating 3.54).

When it came to determining what the experience had meant to their personal development, the respondents were most enthusiastic: 58.5% considered it extremely relevant, 24.4 % felt it was very relevant, and 17.1 felt it was relevant. Of interest here was the fact that none of the respondents felt that the experience was irrelevant to their personal development. This enthusiasm was reflected in the mean rating of 4.41 (See Table 3).

Table 3:
The Relevance of the Study Abroad Experience

Relevance of Semester Abroad Experience to: Future Job Opportunities	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating: 3.80
Completely Irrelevant	0	0.0%	
Irrelevant	2	4.9%	
Relevant	15	36.6%	
Very Relevant	13	31.7%	
Extremely Relevant	11	26.8%	
Relevance of Semester Abroad Experience to: Academic Program at Home	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating: 3.54
Completely Irrelevant	0	0.0%	
Irrelevant	5	12.2%	
Relevant	17	41.5%	
Very Relevant	11	26.8%	
Extremely Relevant	8	19.5%	
Relevance of Semester Abroad Experience to: Your Personal Development	N*	Valid %	Mean Rating: 4.41
Completely Irrelevant	0	0.0%	
Irrelevant	0	0.0%	
Relevant	7	17.1%	
Very Relevant	10	24.4%	
Extremely Relevant	24	58.5%	

*Total N does not make 48 because of missing values for the variable

Students will do it again

Under the heading "Would you do it again?" the respondents' opinions and feelings about their semesters abroad were further analyzed. They were first asked whether or not they would study abroad again at the same institution if it were possible. After that, they were asked if they would study abroad again at another institution. They were also asked why they would or would not repeat the experience.

A little more than half (56.4%) of the respondents indicated they would study again at the same institution, and a large majority (79.5%) said they would study abroad again at another institution. This was a ringing endorsement for the study abroad experience, yet more so for the overall experience than for the institution they had studied at. A sampling of the reasons for not wanting to go back to the same program abroad included such comments as "courses are irrelevant," "been there, done that," "I got bored there," "too unorganized," and "I would like to get a broader perspective and experience something new."

Some of the reasons why students overwhelmingly endorsed the overall experience rather than the individual programs were: “the dynamics of an exchange teach you a lot,” “I realize there are more opportunities now,” and “my personal development was incredible, and I want to see more.”

Overall ratings paint positive picture

Finally, when it was time to ask for some overall assessments, the respondents looked at the quality of the academic program they did abroad, and the quality of the experience in general, on a scale from 1 “Very Poor”, 3 “Neutral” and 5 “Outstanding.” As became apparent throughout all of the other questions, here again it became clear that the study abroad experience had had a much larger perceived impact on the students’ personal development than on their academic careers. Whereas 58.9%% of them rated the overall quality of the academic program they had participated in abroad as good or outstanding (Mean rating 3.54), nearly all of the respondents (94.9%) felt that the quality of the overall experience was good or outstanding (Mean rating 4.38) (See Table 4).

**Table 4:
The Quality of the Academic Program Abroad and the Overall Experience**

The Quality of the Academic Program Abroad	N*	Valid %	Mean Score: 3.54
Very Poor	2	5.1%	
Poor	5	12.8%	
Neutral	9	23.1%	
Good	16	41.0%	
Outstanding	7	17.9%	
The Quality of the Overall Experience	N*	Valid %	Mean Score: 4.38
Very Poor	0	0.0%	
Poor	1	2.6%	
Neutral	1	2.6%	
Good	19	48.7%	
Outstanding	18	46.2%	

*Total N does not make 287 because of missing values for the variable.

Comparative analysis shows significant differences of opinion

In order to determine whether any of the observed differences of opinion were significant or not, several means tests were used to compare the opinions of distinct groups in the sample. The study first looked at whether the gender of the respondent had any significant effect on his/her perceptions about the study abroad experience. As there were two separate groups based on the value of a single variable (male-female), and as the level of data provided by the questions using the five-point Likert scale was ordinal, this analysis was done by means of T-tests. In all instances, the null hypotheses assumed that the population means were equal, and the alpha level was set at .05. The study found no significant differences of opinion between male and female students about their opinions.

When the opinions of the incoming students were compared to those of the students who had studied abroad, some significant differences of opinion were found. A limitation here was that this grouping did not allow for a distinction among countries or institutions. A more detailed analysis of the data based on individual countries and programs, however, was deemed beyond the scope of this article.

The study found three significant differences of opinion between the groups (See Table 5). First, it was found that outgoing students (US natives) rated the housing

arrangement at their host institutions abroad significantly lower than the incoming students. Second, incoming students rated the overall quality of the academic program they had studied at in the US significantly higher than the outgoing students. Yet, as opposed to that, outgoing students were significantly more appreciative of the overall experience than their incoming peers.

Table 5:
Effect of Origins on Perceptions: Incoming vs. Outgoing

		N*	Mean	St. D.	F	Sig.
Academic Level of Difficulty: Exchange Program Compared to Home	I	14	2.57	1.158	1.360	.250
	O	32	3.41	.946		
Level of Care for your General Needs: Exchange Program Compared to Home	I	14	4.64	.633	2.344	.133
	O	32	2.19	.896		
Housing Arrangements: Exchange Program Compared to Home	I	14	4.00	.784	7.430	.009***
	O	30	2.80	.997		
Overall Level of Organization/Structure: Exchange Program Compared to Home	I	14	4.50	.650	.732	.397
	O	32	1.91	.818		
Relevance of Semester Abroad Experience to: Future Job Opportunities	I	12	4.42	.793	.044	.835
	O	29	3.55	.827		
Relevance of Semester Abroad Experience to: Academic Program at Home	I	12	3.42	.996	.001	.970
	O	29	3.59	.946		
Relevance of Semester Abroad Experience to: Personal Development	I	12	4.08	.793	.003	.959
	O	29	4.55	.736		
Rate the quality of the academic program abroad	I	12	4.25	.452	7.975	.008***
	O	27	3.22	1.155		
Rate the quality of the overall experience abroad	I	12	4.17	.389	6.596	.014**
	O	27	4.48	.753		

*Total N does not make 46 because of missing values for the variable

** Significant at the .05 level

*** Significant at the .01 level

Conclusion

Feedback drives development efforts

In our search for the holy grail of international education, the feedback we receive from the students who participate in our exchange programs needs to be taken very seriously and should be incorporated in our development efforts. Just like course evaluations at the end of each semester, surveys like the one discussed here provide us with valuable information on our study abroad programs, information that can help us create a perfect (if perhaps illusive) study abroad experience.

This study found that hospitality management students from Northern Arizona University who had participated in study abroad programs and their peers from abroad who had studied at the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management were generally very appreciative of the experience. Even though the reasons for studying abroad were more personal than academic (it was primarily seen as a good opportunity to live and travel in other countries and cultures, rather than a good academic experience), they

felt that the experience also helped them in their future careers, and that it was relevant to their academic programs at home.

Of interest were the differences of opinion between incoming and outgoing hospitality management students: whereas students coming to the US rated the quality of the academic program they were involved in significantly higher, students going from the US were significantly more appreciative of the quality of the overall experience. Almost all of the respondents said that they would study abroad again if it were possible, which is the best endorsement possible for these programs.

When students were asked what they considered to be the greatest benefit of studying abroad, the most common answer was that it gave them a better understanding of other cultures in that it presented them with a different perspective on other people and on life in general. Many respondents said that, while they learned about other cultures, they also learned more about themselves and that they appreciated their own culture more because of the experience. Many of them felt they had grown as a person, that they had become open-minded and well rounded, and that they had learned how to deal with adversity. In the words of one respondent: "I learned more about the way the rest of the world functions, and how I function outside of the US."

When asked what they perceived to be the greatest challenges of studying abroad, the predominant issue was one of adaptation, adaptation to different customs, cultures, food, teaching styles, academic standards and systems, pace of life, and a different language. Many also felt that being away from friends and family, being pushed out of one's comfort zone and being alone was a challenge, as was having to cope with stereotypes that existed about Americans in other parts of the world. As one student put it: "My biggest challenge was being American, and having to deal with the 'cowboy attitude' the US has painted all over the world."

As administrators and faculty involved in study abroad programs we are convinced that these programs have merit. We know that a semester of studies abroad helps our students become more mature, more independent, more appreciative of other cultures, and also more appreciative of their own culture. Yet, do our students also know that? Only through immersion in other cultures, and through living abroad for a while, they learn to appreciate the experience fully and reap the benefits it may bring them.

In this study, we observed that we are at least comparable to our foreign partners in the area of academic level of difficulty in the eyes of our students, even though the way in which we educate students in higher education is very different from the way in which college level students are educated in different parts of the world, and that our housing arrangements are seen as better than the housing situations in other countries.

Exchange students not only gain an appreciation for other cultures when they return, but also look upon their own culture in a more positive light. They are more aware of the value of their own academic programs and home universities after they come back as compared to before they left. They feel out of place when they return from their semester abroad, and at the same time they feel comfortable about being back in their familiar surroundings, they are sad that their international adventure is over, yet happy to be back, they are aware of the large world around them, and pleased to be back in their own small world. In a sense they have the best of both worlds. What more can we really ask for?

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