

Chapter 8

Critical Components in Preparing Students for Short– Term Study Tours to Asia

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ABSTRACT

Universities need to provide effective support for students and staff to successfully engage in intercultural learning activities as part of outbound mobility experiences. This chapter addresses the less researched area of pre-departure support for student mobility experiences in Asia. The research participants for this study included eight academic study tour leaders and three administrative staff, plus five student focus groups representing various disciplines in one Australian university. All participants had recently undertaken a short-term study tour to an Asian destination. This chapter identifies the key areas of preparation for a short-term study tour from the multiple perspectives of those who organise and lead the study tour, to those who participate in the experience. The chapter concludes with recommendations for how preparation for short-term study tours may be improved, including a discussion of roles and responsibilities for students, staff and their institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Many universities provide exchange and study abroad opportunities for students to engage in experiential intercultural activities within the academic curriculum. The benefits of international education includes the creation of a ‘knowledge market’ of students who are more globally minded, mobile and interculturally skilled (UNESCO, 2013). Overseas exchange and other student mobility program participants (including staff) contribute to the creation and strengthening of educational, economic, political and cultural networks between their home and host countries.

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Research also indicates that such an applied international experience, when properly supported, enhances students' employability, intercultural competence, global perspectives, and intercultural awareness and sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006). Lawrence (2006) found that 70% of multinational employers regarded overseas study experience as 'a definite positive on a graduate resume' (p. 30) and that one eighth of all employers recruit graduates specifically for their international experience. Studies applying a comparative approach indicate that students who study abroad have greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and become more globally-minded than their peers who remain on campus (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright & McMillen, 2009).

Historically, the majority of student mobility programs have seen students venture to OECD countries (i.e., United States, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and Japan) (UNESCO, 2013). The Australian Federal Government funded AUD \$3.4 million in support of student mobility endeavours in 2009 alone (Australian Education International, 2010). More recently, however, there has been a focus on promoting student outbound mobility programs to neighbouring countries.

The impetus for increased student mobility sojourns to Asia, in particular, has arisen from recent Australian Government efforts to boost domestic ties, business and stakeholder relationships with the Indo Pacific region. Overseen by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), with a commitment of AUD \$100 million over five years, the New Colombo Plan supports Australian students to participate in internships and study opportunities in Asia (DFATa, n.d.).

Since 2013, the Plan has provided students with a scholarship of one year's duration for internships and mentorships to over 38 Asian destinations, or mobility grants for short-term, long-term study trips, research, mentorships, internships and practicums. It encourages a two-way flow of students, in addition to the thousands of other students from the region undertaking educational courses in Australia each year (DFATb, n.d.). Currently, Australia currently receives most of its international students from Asia, with more than a quarter coming from China (Norton, 2014).

In line with the aims of the New Colombo Plan, there have also been a number of significant changes to the Commonwealth Government's OS-Help scheme, which provides funding to students for short-term credit-bearing courses in international contexts. The scheme has made it significantly easier and less costly for students to take advantage of mobility opportunities. Under the scheme, students may apply for a loan to cover certain components of their study abroad program (e.g., airfares, accommodation, travel and study expenses) (Study Assist, n.d.). Higher Education institutions have responded by providing an increasing number and range of mobility opportunities (Malicki, 2012), keen to raise the profile of student mobility experiences as part of their commitment to internationalised education and engagement with Asian neighbours.

Prior to the development and implementation of the New Colombo Plan, The *Outward Mobility Best Practice Guide for Australian Universities (The Guide)* (Malicki, 2012) identified trends among current Australian university mobility programs. The Guide reported that while there had been an increase in the number of programs on offer, in particular here had been even more significant growth in short-term mobility experiences.

A study by Nam (2011) into the experience of American short-term study abroad participants going to Europe and Asia revealed that students selected short-term study opportunities for specific reasons. Similar to the positive outcomes to be gained from longer, semester-long exchanges, these short-term sojourners cited benefits such as significant improvements in their professional and personal development. Other significant benefits included students actually being more inclined to attend such programs in the future. Bretag and van der Veen (2013), with similar findings by Forsey, Broomhall and Davis

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