

Chapter 7

Students' Perceived Benefits of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs: A Case Study of Hong Kong Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Short-term study abroad programs have been increasingly emphasized in expanding university curricula since the beginning of the 21st Century. This chapter aims to understand students' perceptions of short-term study abroad programs in the context of Hong Kong Higher Education (HE). Its objectives are to examine students' perceived benefits, concerns and the issues facing them when deciding on their participation in these programs. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, a case study was conducted in the eight universities of Hong Kong. Results show that the students strongly believed that the greatest benefits of taking part in these programs included enhancing their personal growth and intercultural development. The significance of this chapter is to contribute new knowledge to the understanding of students' perceptions and values of outbound short-term study abroad in an Asian/Chinese context.

INTRODUCTION

Although it was such a pain dealing with the issues of deciding whether or not to participate in the exchange program at the time, this kind of study abroad experience brought me memories that will last a lifetime. (Megan)

The expansion of student mobility in terms of short-term study abroad programs has important academic, cultural, economic, political, and societal outcomes for both the sending and host institutions and their countries, as well as for the students involved in these programs. Universities have been introducing ex-

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change or short-term study abroad programs into their curricula since the beginning of the 21st Century. Governments and universities in Western countries have been researching the effectiveness of the integration of various types of short-term study abroad programs in their Higher Education (HE) curricula. Similar to other Western countries, short-term study abroad programs are increasingly emphasised in the curricula of Hong Kong universities. However, few research studies have been undertaken in the Chinese or Asian context.

This chapter aims to understand students' perceptions of these programs in the context of Hong Kong HE. Its objectives are to examine students' perceived value, concerns and issues facing them when deciding whether to participate in these programs. A case study was conducted in the eight HE institutions (HEIs) in Hong Kong, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Background

Research has shown that participation in a study abroad program could lead to positive outcomes such as enhanced intellectual growth, personal development, increased global mindedness, cultural understanding and increased job skills (Watson, 2013; Thot, 1998; Dwyer & Peters, 2004). The impacts of study abroad programs are aggregated around several key areas, including language enhancement, personal development, understanding foreign culture, academic or professional enhancement and global perspectives. Conventional research in the study abroad field has often indicated that the longer students study abroad, the more significant the academic and cultural development and personal growth benefits (Dwyer, 2004).

The results of a study of 3,400 alumni from the US International Education of Students (IES) program suggested, however, that programs of at least six weeks in duration can also be enormously successful in producing important academic, inter- and intra-personal, career, and intercultural development outcomes (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). In viewing the major existing student short-term study abroad or exchange programs across the globe, it is found that the students' key considerations for deciding to participate in such programs are their perceived values, both perceived benefits and drawbacks. Yet, there is relatively little research on the perceived value of these short-term study abroad programs, in particular outside the Western context.

Hong Kong was the chosen site for this study, because it is a unique place which has inherited both Western and Chinese culture. Moreover, there are growing numbers of students participating in outbound short-term study abroad programs. According to statistics released by the University Grants Committee (UGC), the number of outgoing exchange students to mainland China and other countries grew from 3,546 in 2010 to 4,623 in 2013, with a 30% increase within three years. With its British colonial history prior to 1997, Hong Kong has adopted the '*One country, two systems*' under the governance of China since. This is a principle that allows Hong Kong to have different economic, political, legal and education systems from other mainland cities. Against this backdrop, Hong Kong students view joining exchange programs in the mainland as one kind of study abroad experience.

Not only the government, but also the HEIs are eager to promote short-term study abroad programs. For example, in the author's home institution an international office has been established that aims to internationalize the curriculum and on-campus experiences. Its major goals include increasing the number of inbound and outbound exchange students and aiming for every full-time undergraduate to undertake at least one mainland China or international exchange experience during their course of study. Although these short-term study abroad programs are not limited to mainland China, the government and HEI tend to provide a large amount of support to the Hong Kong students who undertake short-term study

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