

Business Study Abroad Tours for Non-Traditional Students: An Outcomes Assessment

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Globalization is here to stay and companies across the world are realizing the importance of having employees with a global mindset. A 2002 study by PricewaterhouseCoopers found that 75% of firms surveyed expected an increase in the number of employees on international assignments, including commuter, short-term, and traditional three- to five-year postings (International Assignments: key trends 2002, 2003). Even firms that do not send employees abroad expect individuals to be involved in the company's global operations and to work in culturally diverse settings. As companies cut costs, many provide little or no on-the-job training to hone employees' cross-border skills. It is thus the task of colleges and universities to prepare students to function and excel in the new and challenging global business environment of the 21st century.

In fact, the leading accrediting body for schools of business, AACSB International, in its latest set of standards, points out that the demands on management education clearly reflect the demands on organizations and managers, i.e., strong and growing global economic forces, differences in organizational and cultural values, cultural diversity among employees and customers, and changing technology in products and procedures (AACSB International, 2004). This organization has recognized the importance of fostering a global perspective in business students and has stressed the idea that education and management practice indicate that exposure to diverse viewpoints leads to higher-quality learning experiences. One method of accomplishing this aim is through short-term study abroad or business study abroad tours.

While there are a variety of forms that study abroad programs may take (see, for example, Engle and Engle, 2003), study abroad has often been associated primarily with semester- or year-long stays in foreign countries, with students enrolled in programs offered by the home university or through arrangements with host foreign universities. Unfortunately, this type of

program is often not a viable option for non-traditional business students. These working adults, attending classes in the evenings or on weekends, are seldom able to take much time away from their jobs and, hence, are usually precluded from the benefits of such programs. In an effort to respond to the needs of these learners, many business schools have included short-term programs, often referred to as study abroad tours, in their curricula. These courses are usually taught by professors from the home institution and include on-site visits, over a one- to three-week period, to businesses in one or multiple destination countries.

Objective and Significance

The purpose of this research was to assess empirically the perceived benefits of a business study tour course in terms of business educational outcomes, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and work-related gains. This study fills a gap in the business-school-related literature by focusing on outcomes of study abroad tours for non-traditional, working adult students.

According to the Institute of International Education, assessments of study abroad programs by their sponsors focus, for the most part, on student satisfaction and gains in language proficiency. Interestingly, intercultural proficiency and career-related outcomes are assessed by few institutions (Sideli, n.d.) and the results of these studies are seldom accessible to individuals outside the sponsoring institution.

As no published information could be found on the assessment of business-school study abroad tours for non-traditional students, the findings of this exploratory study should prove useful to business persons and academicians alike in understanding the role and effectiveness of study abroad tours in better preparing adult students to succeed in a global environment.

Literature Review

A review of the literature found that most works addressed reasons why study abroad courses and study abroad tours are needed, proposed alternative course structures, and suggested various benefits of such programs. Following is a review of some of the most relevant works.

Duke (2000) cited the need for increased US competitiveness in the global economy, the importance of foreign trade, growing ethnic diversity, and the need to meet changing demands as reasons for universities to espouse the study abroad tour. Indeed, it has been suggested that the cross-border scholarly partnerships arising from linkages between institutions involved in study abroad

programs can serve as a means for US students to benefit from scientific and technological advances in other countries (Marcum and Roochnik, 2001).

Since the events of September 11, 2001, a number of experts have suggested that the US's global woes must be addressed through increased cultural understanding and that this can only be accomplished if more US students study abroad. According to Richard W. Riley, former US Secretary of Education, "Since 9/11, it has become clear that the country cannot afford to remain ignorant about other countries" (Kagan, 2003). In keeping with this philosophy, Lawrence H. Summers, President of Harvard, regards as one of Harvard's most important initiatives the expectation that students study abroad at some point during their undergraduate years (Golden, 2004).

Two early studies (Gordon and Smith, 1992; Brokaw, 1996) examined how to plan, organize, and execute short-term study tour courses for undergraduate business students who had limited overseas exposure. Both studies gave details on suggested course structure and trip organization including travel and destination planning, pre-departure preparation, and grading. In yet another study, Porth (1997) proposed a model for designing and teaching study tour courses. He suggested a pre-departure classroom phase to orient students and prepare them for the experiential learning component of the course, an on-site phase with seminars and tours of plants and facilities, and an integration of learning phase after the overseas component.

Schuster (1993) described two classes she developed for executive MBA (EMBA) students at her university. Her "Doing Business in" courses incorporated an in-country as well as overseas component and she reported that the evaluation results were higher than the average for all classes in the EMBA program. In a later study of EMBA students, Cotner *et al* (2003) stated that an international field study was critical to understanding macro-level environments and strategic initiatives at the level of the firm.

Several studies have advanced that study abroad programs improve essential skills for today's globalized business environment. Cheney (2001) posited that business schools must begin to integrate intercultural communication into their curricula to give graduates the preparation necessary to communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition to studying abroad, she advocated structured interaction between US students and international students on campus as a means of accomplishing this integration.

Henthorne *et al* (2001) suggested that the traditional classroom approach to international business education was not as effective as hands-on, action-oriented study abroad programs, emphasizing that knowledge as well

as cultural understanding were key to competing in a global environment. Interestingly, Marlowe *et al* (1998) advanced that even if students do not work in the international arena, study tour courses are effective in making issues and policies “come alive.”

Several authors have suggested that business study abroad tours are useful in developing a global mind-set and world-mindedness in future managers. DeLoach *et al* (2003) proposed that by incorporating facilitated group discussions into study abroad courses, faculty could increase students’ global awareness and substantially reduce the amount of time spent providing feedback during the overseas component.

In one of the few published empirical studies of study abroad programs, Douglas and Jones-Ridders (2001) measured world-mindedness, i.e., the extent to which students value global perspectives on various issues. Their results suggested that participation in study abroad programs, coupled with the cultural difference between a student’s point-of-origin and study abroad location, have a positive impact on the development of world-mindedness.

T e s t i n g a S t u d y A b r o a d M o d e l

Annually from 1997 to 2004, this author directed and taught a multiple-destination business study tour course to Western Europe for non-traditional (i.e., working adult) students at an urban university in the southeastern US. Students could register for three or six semester credit hours, depending on the scope of the research students wished to undertake (see below). While this course was developed independently of any published model, its structure paralleled the model described by Porth (1997). Therefore, it was of interest to test Porth’s predicted outcomes, as well as other pertinent outcomes, on the students who had participated in the study tour courses taught by this author. In order to give perspective to the outcomes assessed in this paper, the objectives and structure of the course are described below.

O b j e c t i v e s o f t h e C o u r s e

The business study tour course was designed to introduce graduate and upper-level undergraduate business students to comparative views of business and help students gain an understanding and appreciation of the factors at work in today’s global environment. The overseas component allowed students to directly interact with managers, government officials and others, and learn firsthand the skills critical to the operation of international business. More specifically, this course gave students an opportunity to:

- Examine theories and practices of organizing, leading, motivating, communicating, and negotiating in different national settings by traveling to foreign countries and meeting with business managers and others,
- Gain an understanding of socio/cultural, political/legal, economic, and technological factors which affect decision-making in an international setting,
- Gain an appreciation of the role of business in different countries and basic operational/social protocol, and
- Identify key issues and similarities and differences relative to management practices.

Structure of the Course

The pre-departure phase of the course was composed of three extended preparation classes. As all students had completed basic business course requirements, the classes focused on: 1) culture, including exercises allowing students to identify their own cultural values and differences and similarities between US and destination business and social values, 2) an introduction to the socio-cultural, political-legal, and economic environments of the countries to be visited, as well as 3) survival language training.

During this phase, students were engaged in the learning process by researching a topic consistent with the objectives of the course and which related to one of the companies to be visited or the industry in which the company operated. Students were required to make a presentation of their findings to the class. All topics were approved by the professor beforehand to insure that all companies/industries to be visited were included in the presentations, that topics reflected a sufficiently high level of academic rigor, and that the scope of the research was appropriate for the number of credit hours for which students were enrolled.

A 15-Question Prompt Sheet was due at the time of the students' oral presentations. This Prompt Sheet related to students' chosen topics and included the following four items:

- 1) an overview of the relevant company/industry,
- 2) a summary of the specific topic the student researched,
- 3) a list of pertinent questions that could be used by all participants during the question-and-answer portions of the on-site visits, and
- 4) a list of reference materials consulted.

The 15-Question Prompt Sheets were distributed to all participants to be placed in a notebook and taken on the overseas component.

The overseas component consisted of a two-week study abroad tour to at least two European countries and included six to eight full- or half-day corporate visits across a variety of industries. During these visits students attended presentations by upper- and mid-level management and, in some cases, students were given an opportunity to interact informally with management. Question-and-answer sessions, as well as visits to production facilities, were also included. Briefings and debriefings relating course objectives to international experiences and linking theory to international business practices were conducted before and after each visit.

Over the eight years, the following companies have hosted students: Swatch, Novartis, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, VibroMeter, Pictet et Cie, United Bank of Switzerland, Credit Suisse, the National Bank of Switzerland, the World Intellectual Property Organization, Nestlé, Morgan Stanley, and the Swiss Stock Exchange (SWZ) in Switzerland, Coca-Cola France, the International Champagne Bureau, Perrier-Jouët, Saint-Gobain, Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux, and UPS in France, Philips, Royal Delft, and Heineken in the Netherlands, and DaimlerChrysler in Germany. Presentations covered, for example, issues in finance, human resources, production, R&D, and strategic marketing.

During the travel portion, students were required to keep a reflective journal of their corporate visits and relevant free-time experiences, including detailed presentation notes and miscellaneous observations. Upon return to the US, students were given four weeks to synthesize their experiences and produce a finished bound journal. Further, students were required to complete a major research paper on the topic they had chosen for their oral presentations. Papers were due seven to eight weeks after completion of the overseas phase. The journal and the research paper were instrumental in helping students integrate the learning that had occurred during the first two phases of the course.

With regard to logistics and cost of the program, in addition to course tuition, students paid a fee covering and travel costs that included transatlantic air fare, inter-European travel via air or bullet train, double occupancy in business-class hotels, American breakfasts, some lunches, and transportation to and from corporate visits. Upon arrival in destination cities, students were led on orientation tours (walking and via public transportation) to acquaint them with the basic lay of the land. Students were encouraged to go as “local”

as possible and were allowed several free days (including weekends and holidays) over the two-week period to shop, see the sites and to experience the cultures of the destination countries on their own.

M e t h o d o l o g y

S u r v e y I n s t r u m e n t

The survey instrument consisted of a demographic information section and an outcomes assessment section that included questions derived from the predicted outcomes in Porth's model (1997). The outcomes assessment section contained eight Likert statements, a constant sum scale permitting respondents to weight the various components of the course with respect to their educational value, a rating question comparing the study tour course to all other business courses the respondent had taken, and three open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to assess the perceived benefits of the course in terms of business educational outcomes, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and work-related gains. The demographic section gathered information on sex, year of birth, nationality, race/ethnicity, program of enrollment, year of participation in the business study tour course, work experience, and travel experience.

S a m p l e a n d Q u e s t i o n n a i r e A d m i n i s t r a t i o n

From 1997 through 2004, a total of 129 students participated in the course. Of this total, approximately 86% were enrolled in the university's evening MBA or MSTM (Master of Science in Technology Management) program targeted toward working adults, while the remainder were upper-level undergraduates in the university's BBA program. Attempts were made to contact all students who had taken the course to solicit their participation.

The survey was administered by the author and an assistant in telephone interviews during Fall 2004. Of the 129 students who had taken the course over the eight-year period, responses were obtained from 70 individuals, for a response rate of 54.3 %. Three attempts were made to reach students for whom telephone numbers or email addresses had been obtained from class records, university alumni records, and telephone/internet directories. Non-respondents included no-answers, telephone disconnects, moved with no forwarding number, as well as 4 individuals who failed to respond to voice messages.

Methods of Analysis

The demographic data were analyzed to provide frequencies. For the Likert statements, constant sum scale, and comparative rating question, mean scores were obtained. Using the t-test, the data were analyzed to see if race/ethnicity and sex had a significant effect on responses. ANOVA was used to test for possible effects of respondents' ages. Further, so as to consider the impact of time and the effects of intervening experiences over the eight years evaluated in this study, ANOVA was also used to test for significant differences based on year of participation. Finally, responses to the open-ended questions were grouped to provide categorical themes.

Results

Demographics

The 70 respondents included 22 males and 48 females. Ninety-three percent were US citizens. In terms of race/ethnicity, 64.3% were White, 32.9% were African-American, and the remaining 2.8% were Asian of Indian heritage.

Ninety percent of respondents were working, with a mean of 11 years of experience, at the time they enrolled in the study tour course. Those who were not employed were in between jobs and looking for work. Respondents worked in a variety of industries, with information (e.g., information technology, media, and publishing), retail trade, finance and insurance, and professional and technical services the most represented. Ages of respondents ranged from 22 to 63, with a mean of 36.3; at the time of respondents' study abroad tour participation, ages ranged from 21 to 56, with a mean of 32.9 and with 50% of respondents between the ages of 26 and 33. Table 1 gives a more detailed breakdown of the age data.

Table 1: Age of respondents

Age Category	Number of respondents in categories: when surveyed	Number of respondents in categories: at the time of study abroad tour participation
20–29	18	28
30–39	31	27
40–49	14	12
50 and over	7	3
Total	70	70

Of those responding to the survey, 83% had been in the MBA/MSTM program, with the remainder in the university's BBA program. Almost a third (28.6%) had never been outside the US before the study abroad tour. Of those who had, 10% had traveled abroad for business purposes. Since their participation in the study abroad tour, 54.3% reported that they had traveled outside the US, with 12.8% citing business as the purpose of their trip.

Respondents included participants for each of the eight years that this study tour course had been offered. Table 2 depicts the numbers and percentages of respondents from each of the years 1997 through 2004.

Table 2: Percentages of respondents, 1997-2004

Year of Business Study Abroad Tour Participation	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents by Respective Class Size
1997	9	39.1
1998	12	60.0
1999	5	29.4
2000	8	50.0
2001	9	47.4
2002	3	33.3
2003	9	100.0
2004	15	93.8
Total	70	

With the exception of the years 2002 and 2003, class size averaged 18.5 students. These two years showed a decided drop in enrollment, attributable anecdotally to fear of traveling after September 11, 2001, and economic considerations on the part of potential participants.

Survey Responses

Likert Statements

Eight Likert statements were administered to respondents with instructions to answer from 1- strongly disagree, to 5- strongly agree. The first two statements queried respondents with regard to the study tour course's effects on cultural awareness and sensitivity. The next six statements compared the study abroad tour with other conventional courses and were specifically directed toward evaluating the study abroad tour experience in terms of business education and cultural self-awareness.

Table 3 gives response ranges as well as sample means for the eight statements. In all cases, the mean scores tended toward the “strongly agree” end of the scale.

Table 3: Responses to Likert statements

Question	Statement	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	I feel Studies Abroad* made me more accepting of other cultures.	3	5	4.70
2	I feel Studies Abroad* helped me work better with diverse cultures in the United States.	3	5	4.51
3	In comparison to conventional classroom business courses that I have taken, Studies Abroad* allowed me:			
a	To better understand linkages between theory and practice.	3	5	4.59
b	To better understand the complexity of business.	4	5	4.63
c	To better appreciate the wisdom of the contingency approach to management.	3	5	4.41
d	To better appreciate the influence of culture on business decision-making.	4	5	4.86
e	To better gain insight into my own culture.	1	5	4.06
f	To better see that learning is fun.	3	5	4.80

* The term “Studies Abroad,” rather than study abroad tour, was used in the questionnaire as this was the official title of the course.

Race/Ethnicity and Sex

In order to determine if the demographic variables of race/ethnicity and sex had significant effects on responses, t-tests were conducted. No significant differences were found for seven of the eight statements. However, for Question 3a (“In comparison to conventional classroom business courses that I have taken, Studies Abroad allowed me to better understand linkages between theory and practice.”), a significant difference was found between the responses of the males and the females, with females agreeing significantly more strongly with this statement. Perhaps this difference is because the female participants may have more successfully decoded nonverbal cues than did the males (Rosenthal and DePaulo, 1979). Further, according to Holbrook (1986), females are more visually oriented and may have thus picked up additional or

different cues than their male counterparts during the corporate presentations and visits to the production facilities. Along this same line of thought, men and women have been found to react significantly differently to visual stimuli (Jones *et al.*, 1998) and to process available information differently (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). All of these factors may have had an effect on the responses of those surveyed.

Age and Year of Participation/Passage of Time

ANOVA was used to analyze whether age had a significant effect on responses to the 8 Likert statements. No significant differences were found. In addition, ANOVA was used to examine whether year of participation, as a surrogate for the impact of time and the effects of intervening experiences, affected participants' responses. Again, no significant differences were found. Perhaps the differences in ages and in lengths of time away from the study abroad tour experience were mitigated by a common maturity and by previous work experience on the part of these non-traditional students.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of mean responses for Questions 1 through 3f by demographics.

Constant Sum Scale

It was also of interest to assess respondents' perceptions of the educational value of the various components of the course by means of a constant sum scale. Respondents were asked to divide 100 points among the five major components of the course, i.e., class instruction, on-site visits, reflective journal, research project and paper, and free time, so as to reflect their assessment of the educational value of each component. In addition to providing a rank ordering of components, this methodology allows for assessment of the relative importance of the components, e.g., a component weighted at 30 points would be perceived as three times more important than another component assigned a weight of 10.

As might be expected, on-site visits were perceived as providing the greatest educational value to participants and were judged to be almost twice as valuable as the next most heavily weighted component, the research project and paper.

Table 5 shows mean weights assigned for each component. Analysis of the constant sum weights by demographics yielded no significant differences.

Table 4: Mean responses by demographic variables

	Question							
	1	2	3a	3b	3c	3d	3e	3f
Sex:								
Male	4.77	4.50	4.27*	4.64	4.50	4.82	3.91	4.73
Female	4.67	4.52	4.73*	4.63	4.38	4.88	4.13	4.83
Race/ethnicity								
White	4.69	4.53	4.60	4.64	4.47	4.87	4.13	4.82
African-American	4.70	4.52	4.57	4.65	4.35	4.87	3.87	4.74
Asian (Indian)**	5.00	4.00	4.50	4.00	4.00	4.50	4.50	5.00
Age when surveyed								
20–29	4.56	4.39	4.44	4.67	4.67	4.89	4.28	4.78
30–39	4.87	4.52	4.48	4.58	4.26	4.81	4.03	4.84
40–49	4.50	4.57	4.93	4.71	4.43	4.93	3.71	4.71
50 and over	4.71	4.71	4.71	4.57	4.43	4.86	4.29	4.86
Year of <i>Studies Abroad</i> participation								
1997	4.78	4.44	4.67	4.67	4.44	5.00	4.56	5.00
1998	4.67	4.50	4.75	4.50	4.08	4.92	3.25	4.67
1999	5.00	5.00	4.60	4.80	4.60	4.80	4.00	4.67
2000	4.50	4.38	4.63	4.50	4.13	4.88	3.88	5.00
2001	4.67	4.33	4.56	4.44	4.22	4.78	4.33	4.89
2002	4.67	5.00	4.67	4.67	4.33	5.00	4.33	4.67
2003	4.67	4.44	4.56	4.89	4.67	4.78	4.11	4.56
2004	4.70	4.51	4.59	4.63	4.41	4.86	4.06	4.80

* Significant at the 0.01 level

** Because of the small number of Asians in the sample, this category was not included in the race/ethnicity analysis.

Table 5: Perception of educational value of course components

Component	Mean Weight
On-Site Visits	34
Research Project and Paper	19
Class Instruction	17
Reflective Journal	15
Free Time Abroad	15

Rating Question

With regard to the survey's rating question comparing the study tour course to other business courses the participants had taken, respondents were asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 high) compared to any other business course you have taken, how would you rate Studies Abroad [the business study tour course] as a learning experience?" The mean for all respondents was 9.54, indicating that respondents held very favorable opinions of the learning experience that the study abroad tour had provided when compared to their learning experiences in other business courses. Over 60 percent of the respondents rated the study abroad tour as a 10, with less than 10 percent assigning a rating below 9. Analysis of this question by demographics yielded no significant differences.

Open-ended Questions

Respondents were asked to cite, in an open-ended format, the advantages and disadvantages of the study abroad tour as an approach to business education. Responses to these questions were grouped by theme and are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

In terms of the advantages, themes 1 through 6 appear to fall into the general categories of cultural awareness; hands-on, real-time learning; globalization awareness; increased self-confidence; access to management; and acceptance of diversity and improved intercultural skills. It should be noted that gains with regard to increased cultural awareness and knowledge were cited as an advantage by over 50% of the respondents. Interestingly, in terms of the disadvantages of a study abroad tour as an approach to business education, over 40% of respondents could think of none. Noteworthy with regard to the respondents citing the brevity of the travel portion as a disadvantage, nearly all also stated that an additional one to two weeks would not be feasible as it would not be possible to be away from work for that length of time.

It was of further interest to query participants to see if the study abroad tour had direct job-related impacts. To this end, respondents were asked to give specific examples of how their study abroad tour experience had an impact on their careers and/or the way they worked. Responses to this question were grouped by theme and are presented in Table 8.

Eighty-nine percent of respondents indicated that their work performance and behavior had in some way been positively affected by their study abroad tour experience. The culture-related gains cited under advantages to a study abroad tour as an approach to business education seem to have especially helped respondents in their professional duties. Interestingly, participants' employers

Table 6: Perceived Advantages of a Study Abroad Tour as an Approach to Business Education

Theme	Description	Frequency
1	Students see the effect of different national cultures on company operations, as well as on human behaviors, and gain a perspective of non-US ways of working and doing business, e.g., corporate strategies, consumer behaviors, business ethics.	37
2	Students see businesses in real-life and in real-time, as more current than a textbook, and as a hands-on experience; see practical applications of theory and an adaptation of theory to cultural differences.	29
3	Students gain a global perspective which is important because of globalization and resulting changes in the workplace; see world as smaller with economic interactions; gain other viewpoints of US business practices and see far-reaching effects of US business decisions.	17
4	Students gain self-confidence and increased comfort in unfamiliar surroundings; begin to see world differently and are inspired to learn more.	14
5	Students are able to interact with upper-level management to whom they would not have access otherwise; have opportunity to ask questions of these individuals; feel this has a profound and lasting impact as something they could not have experienced in a classroom.	11
6	Students learn to accept other cultures and gain appreciation of diversity; learn how to relate to people of other cultures.	8

Table 7: Perceived Disadvantages of a Study Abroad Tour as an Approach to Business Education

Theme	Description	Frequency
1	Two-week travel component too short; ideally could be from a few days to two weeks longer.	20
2	Costly; cost prohibitive for some; gives those who can afford it an advantage that others don't have.	9
3	Anxiety-producing, in terms of unfamiliar settings, traveling with "strangers", far from home, language barriers, non-traditional class structure, uncertainty of developments back at work, fast pace.	8
4	Some presentations not relevant to particular students' areas of interest.	3

Table 8: Job-related examples

Theme	Description	Frequency
1	Course made respondents more aware and tolerant of cultural differences among co-workers, customers, and suppliers; resulted in a better appreciation of cultural challenges and the role culture plays in decision-making at work.	24
2	Course altered the way respondents approach clients from different backgrounds; improved cross-cultural communication skills through better understanding of thought processes, frames of reference, and work ethics.	23
3	Course gave respondents a competitive advantage on the job; altered career paths.	20
4	Course was a mind-broadening experience with respect to ethnic diversity as well as intercultural diversity of viewpoints.	10
5	Course helped students better understand and relate to superiors who were not American.	5
6	Course led to international work contacts.	2

appear to place value on the study tour course as several respondents indicated that they were selected, over other employees, for tasks related to international activities as a result of their having taken the study tour course.

Observations and Discussion

To provide another assessment of outcomes and student learning that would be independent of the self-reported data gathered through the survey in this study, final grades for the business study tour courses, "Studies Abroad," were compared to final grades for all other courses taught by this author from 1997 through 2004. ANOVA was used to see if significant differences existed. The analysis revealed that the grades earned by students in the study tour courses were significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) than those earned by students in all other courses. These results corroborate the findings of this study, further indicating that this course format appears to lead to higher levels of student motivation, learning, and success than traditional classroom courses (see Table 9).

Table 9: Mean grades for “Studies Abroad” and other courses

Year	“Studies Abroad” Mean Grade*	All Other Courses Mean Grade*
1997	3.94	3.37
1998	3.90	3.25
1999	3.91	3.57
2000	3.88	3.36
2001	3.84	3.19
2002	3.50	3.10
2003	3.83	2.97
2004	3.91	2.91

* University grading scale: A = 4, B+ = 3.5, B = 3, C+ = 2.5, C = 2, D = 1, F = 0

The empirical analyses in this study confirm this author’s longstanding belief that study abroad tours are an effective means of teaching international business and helping internationalize curricula in programs directed toward working adult students. In fact, based on comments made on end-of-term, anonymous course evaluations, the study abroad tour was, for many students, the most valuable course in their program of study and many felt that a study abroad tour should be a requirement of business programs. Comments such as the following attest to the strength of students’ beliefs that study abroad tours are effective: “This course was by far the most meaningful...;” “I think this is the most effective course I have ever taken in school;” “I feel that this trip should be a mandatory part of the MBA program to ensure that students are competitive” “I would recommend that this course be required of every graduate student ...so that every student would be exposed to the way that business is conducted in the world [and not only] from the American point of view.” Further, for many students, participation in such programs may indeed be a life-changing experience with learning going beyond increased business knowledge, as is evidenced by comments such as: “This course was very informative and life changing,” “Overall, it was a great life and learning experience,” “This was an incredible experience educationally, professionally, and personally,” “Personally, I feel I have grown.”

With regard to the structure of the course, given the otherwise unlikely opportunity for exposure to upper-level management across a variety of industries and countries, it is perhaps understandable that the findings of this study indicated that students believed that the on-site corporate visits provided the greatest educational value of all course components. While this author agrees

with this assessment, the role played by the remaining components of the study abroad tour in the learning process should not be minimized. The following paragraphs focus on the other course components that also led to the success of this course.

Pre-departure class instruction is critical in laying the groundwork and preparing students for the learning that is to occur during the travel portion of the course. During the first class session students should be instructed on how to prepare a notebook, with dividers for each country and company to be visited, to be taken abroad and used as an organized means of recording notes and making personal observations. In addition, these classes should be used to provide coverage of general country information, economic data, information on companies to be visited, etc., and also to allow students to learn about and explore their feelings toward destination cultures and to gain an understanding of how their own cultures affect the way they may interpret their overseas experiences. An effective means of accomplishing this is for the faculty member to lecture and assign readings on culture and the effects of culture on business. Another useful exercise is for faculty to ask each student to think of at least two descriptors of the individuals in each country to be visited and to write these on the board for students to put into their notebooks to be taken abroad. For example, descriptors that have been suggested by students for the Swiss have included frugal, conservative, unfriendly, etc. Students should then be instructed to comment in their journals on each of these descriptors based on their own experiences during the travel portion. This technique can be invaluable in gaining cultural understanding and dispelling stereotypes. The following comments taken from course evaluations appear to support the points above: "The class meetings prior to the trip were excellent preparation for understanding the business and cultural practices in Europe," "My perceptions of people and places have been changed for life."

In addition, debriefing sessions immediately after the visits are quite effective in re-emphasizing ideas presented by management during corporate visits and in helping students synthesize information. In the words of a participant: "[The professor's] commentaries after each corporate visit ...helped reinforce the learning experience. I came away with a better understanding of how language, culture, and politics in other countries offer different challenges in business from what I encounter domestically."

While most participants do not find the research for and writing of the required paper to be as "exciting" as some of the other components of the course, students gain invaluable company and industry knowledge as well as

experience in researching foreign markets and foreign operations of companies through this exercise. As some students may not have had experience in this kind of research, faculty may need to direct students in terms of appropriate sources of secondary information. Again, comments such as: “This class has been extremely fulfilling. I am glad that the instructional design of the class required proper research ...” attest to student recognition of the importance of this component.

Keeping a journal is an effective means of helping students organize, synthesize, retain, and reflect upon information. At a minimum, students should be instructed to include the basic facts of each corporate visit (date, name of company, names and position of lecturers/participants), and detailed notes and observations from the visit. This author has found that asking students also to log other experiences, such as sight-seeing, dinners, encounters with locals etc., and to accompany such entries with their thoughts and impressions, is especially useful with regard to increasing cultural sensitivity and gaining cross-cultural knowledge. Anecdotal evidence indicates that students review their journals, even years after completing the course.

Finally, considerable learning can occur during the free time allotted to students. During the pre-departure classes students should be counseled as to worthwhile activities in which they may wish to engage during their free time. Additionally, as a part of the orientation tours of each city, sights to visit and other activities that would expose students to business practices and local culture may be suggested.

C o n c l u s i o n

The purpose of this research was to assess, for non-traditional business students, the perceived benefits of a two-week business study tour course in terms of business educational outcomes, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and work-related gains. This study fills a gap in the business-school-related literature by focusing on outcomes of study abroad tours for non-traditional, working adult students. Based on the results of this study, it appears that well-structured study abroad tours are a viable approach to business education for working adult learners and, from these individuals’ perspectives, more effective than conventional classroom courses for all business educational outcomes examined. Further, compared to other business courses taken, respondents rated this course very highly as a learning experience. In terms of course structure, respondents felt that the on-site visits and research projects/papers provided the greatest educational value.

In summary, in terms of respondents' perceptions of the advantages of the study tour course as an approach to business education, most respondents indicated they benefited by gaining insight into the effects of culture on business and non-US approaches to work and business. Further, the real-time and real-life aspects of the study abroad tour were seen as advantages as was the opportunity to see practical applications of theory.

With regard to disadvantages, cost was mentioned by a number of respondents as well as stress related to group travel, lack of familiarity with language and customs, and being away from work. While brevity of the two-week travel component was cited as a disadvantage, a longer stay would not fit into the work schedule of most respondents. Individuals designing programs for the working student might consider an optional longer travel component.

Given globalization trends and increasing cultural diversity in the workplace, it is noteworthy that direct job- and/or career-related impacts were reported by almost all of the participants. Many respondents indicated that having participated in the course gave them an advantage on the job and, in some cases, opened up new career paths. In addition, respondents indicated that knowledge gained with regard to the effects of culture altered the way they related to individuals with whom they came in contact on the job. Further, several respondents pointed out that as a result of mergers and acquisitions, their direct superiors were no longer US-Americans and, as a result of knowledge gained in the study tour course, they were more accepting and could better understand and relate to these individuals.

The results of this study appear very favorable in terms of the benefits of business study abroad tours for non-traditional students. However, as the study was exploratory, further research is warranted on this topic. Future researchers may wish to replicate this study with larger and more geographically varied samples. Further, so as to facilitate comprehension during the telephone survey, only positively-worded Likert statements were used. Future researchers, especially those using a greater number of statements, may wish to include both positively- and negatively-worded items in the survey. In addition, the effects of similar courses taught by different faculty could be examined, as could courses involving non-Western European destination countries.

Today, more than ever, it is imperative that business students be prepared to operate effectively in a globally interactive environment. While conventional university courses offered through various delivery methods will continue to be of importance in this endeavor, study abroad tours, like those described by Porth (1997) and as set forth above, enable students to experience

in real-time and firsthand international business and cultural diversity at the micro- and macro-levels. The results of this study indicate that, for the non-traditional student, this type of program provides substantial benefits with regard to business education, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and work-related gains. As a result, universities may wish to include such offerings in curricula designed for the non-traditional, working adult student. Additionally, employers should be able to realize substantial benefits gained by this group of students and should want to enable their employees, either financially or in “time off,” to avail themselves of this opportunity.

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