

What Goes Up Need Not Come Down the Same: Exploring the Positive Impacts of Study Abroad on 21st Century Students

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Abstract:

Study abroad is an engaging, helpful, and potentially life changing experience. After explaining where students worldwide tend to travel and why, this paper will focus mainly on what the impact of study abroad is on the students who partake in these opportunities upon their return from their travels. Many students find that they have a deeper appreciation for other cultures upon their return and this keeps them more worldly; this is something that can help them in an increasingly globalized workforce. As well, the quality of education they receive prior to employment can be higher in many cases; the way students view learning after returning to their home country and the potential to complete their degree sooner are examples of ways in which such quality increases can be made. Also noted are some of the challenges students face when studying abroad as well as a few key obstacles that may deter students from travelling for education in the first place. This research will delve into the finer points of what students go through when

they travel internationally and ultimately make the case that they go through positive changes upon their return from studying abroad.

Humankind began its journey as a nomadic species. Even after settling into cities in ancient Mesopotamia, humans had the urge to explore. They kept cultivating into new lands until nearly the entire planet had been covered with human influence. As we continue through the twenty-first century, populations continue to spread and intercultural activity increases; thus, international markets will likely become even more intertwined. These trends have prompted many universities to facilitate and encourage students to study abroad, partly because this “...rapid rate of globalization has led private-sector businesses to call for colleges to produce interculturally competent graduates” (Hadis 57). Millions of students have taken advantage of these kinds of opportunities, and the number of students studying abroad is increasing (OECD 30).

Countless factors contribute to this heightened popularity, including increased social and economic globalization (OECD 30), more support from universities (Stemler 25), as well as governments, in the sense that many “countries have eased their immigration policies to encourage the temporary or permanent immigration of international students,” (OECD 34). Information about study abroad opportunities has also become much more readily available. In order to have a complete understanding of the facets of this opportunity, researchers must know where students travel and the impact it has on those countries. In addition, researchers must also identify the challenges students who study abroad face before leaving and the ways to make that process easier. Students need to understand the challenges and process in order to make logical decisions in regards to whether study abroad is the right call for them or not. Overall, one thing is certain: twenty-first century students who study abroad benefit

immensely from their participation in the program, from gaining job skills to experiencing cultural enlightenment.

The term “study abroad” covers a variety of options for students. Some students who study abroad do so for only a few months or one year; others are acquiring full degrees or certificates. Before understanding the way students change after studying abroad, one must first have a basic understanding of the world of study abroad. As of 2009, “[s]ix countries – Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States – hosted more than half of the world’s students who studied abroad” (OECD 32). This shows that the majority of study abroad participants tend to favour studying in Western countries. At first glance, it may be thought that this is because the majority of students who study abroad are from predominantly Western cultures and would prefer to stay in their comfort zone, but this assumption is incorrect. In reality, over half of all study abroad students worldwide are from Korea, India, or China (OECD 30). Additionally, students hailing from Western nations, such as Canada, tend to have an interest in travelling outside of Western culture. In fact, with the exception of Oceania and Western Europe, the most preferred travel destinations of some Saskatchewan nursing students in one study were Africa, South America, and the Caribbean (Kent-Wilkinson, Dietrich Leurer, Luimes, Ferguson, and Murray 944).

Location aside, it is even more important to understand why students study abroad. Host countries certainly want international students because “international students bring to the host universities financial resources that otherwise would be unavailable” (Grayson 71), though it should be noted that this refers to students who are travelling to another country for their degree and not for a short period of time; these students are still studying abroad though, and would still experience positive effects from an international experience.

Whether students are travelling for years or months, however, still begs the question: what makes students actually decide to embark on an international journey? One article identifies several key reasons for why students in a nursing program at the University of Saskatchewan wanted to study abroad in terms of expected benefits from their travels. The factor that was considered most important by almost 97% of students surveyed was “learning about a different culture” (Kent-Wilkinson et al 944). These responses correlate with the aforementioned data on where students prefer to study abroad (primarily Western countries for non-western students and vice versa).

In such a globalized society, multicultural understanding becomes increasingly necessary. This is not only helpful for day-to-day life, however. Knowing more about different cultures allows people to function better in their workplaces, especially if their work requires them to travel. Another highly supported reason for the nursing students was “gaining self-awareness and independence” (Kent Wilkinson et al 945). Travelling to a new country alone, as study abroad students often do, can be a very daunting task. In many cases, students do not speak the native tongue, which may contribute to a feeling of isolation. Furthermore, they are away from their family and friends and must quickly adapt to new customs, cultures, and systems, which can be extremely difficult. Learning about a new culture and gaining self-awareness, along with other reasons that will be mentioned later, are excellent examples of why students would embark on an international adventure. These aspirations prior to leaving match up with behaviour displayed upon returning home, which helps prove that students who study abroad experience positive changes as a result of their travels.

While study abroad is often a rewarding experience, it would be both naïve and false to say that there are no negative impacts or challenges surrounding the topic. For the nursing students, the greatest obstacle in studying abroad was funding (Kent Wilkinson *et al* 945), which turns out to be a common barrier for

the general student population (Costello 51). Many students may not even try to study abroad if the perception is that it will cost them too much.

Besides money, other costs may be at stake when dealing with an extended leave from one's home country. One thing students may consider is that the relationships with family, friends, significant others, or colleagues and bosses could be strained if they left for half a year or longer (Kent Wilkinson *et al* 945). Furthermore, another very real factor that must be considered is safety. I too have considered the idea of studying abroad, with a particular interest in going to Germany. The recent refugee crisis, bombings in the Middle East, and the attacks on Paris have made me question whether or not travelling to Europe is a good idea right now. I am not the only student who feels this way, and in fact, "Safety concerns (12%) and political instability (11%) were perceived as a factor by the nursing students" (Kent Wilkinson *et al* 946). This is especially relevant as it may provide insight on why Western countries are the most popular countries to travel to. Oftentimes, Western countries are more stable and safer than other countries, thus making them more appealing to international students. This is important to note as students could face strains on their finances or relationships, and in fact may even be put at risk of physical harm.

Regardless of the potential challenges related to studying abroad, these opportunities often herald countless benefits for many of the students who take part in them. One study looked specifically at one of the most important things to students after graduation: getting a job. In fact, "A recent study suggested that nearly 85% of 1008 students who participated in study abroad programs between 2006 and 2011 felt that this experience helped them to build job skills" (Xu, de Silva, Neufeldt, and Dane 90). Becoming employed in one's own field directly after graduation can be very difficult. Many employers want several years of related experience before even considering an applicant for a job. If a freshly graduated student does not have applicable experience, it can be hard to find

work. In those cases it is beneficial to have an edge over other applicants, and that edge can come from study abroad. As mentioned above, having a more in-depth sense of the world and its cultures will make someone a valuable asset to most companies in today's globalized world. Also, while the article mentioned (Xu, de Silva, Neufeldt, and Dane 90) above primarily focused on how Western students gain skills that make them more employable, students from other nations should not be forgotten. One study explained that, "On average, 25% of international students who did not renew their student permits changed their student status in the host country mainly for work-related reasons" (OECD 34). This means that some foreign students are honing their workplace skills, and these skills are helping them gain employment in the country they studied in. Even with these advantages, some students may not take part in study abroad for fear that it will take longer to complete their degree. However, there is a general trend that students who study abroad have a slightly higher rate of degree completion in four-year programs compared to students who did not study abroad (Xu et al 96). So, study abroad not only develops job skills, but it can actually increase their rate of degree completion.

Gaining more skills for the workplace and completing degrees at a higher rate, while important, are only just the start of the positive changes university study abroad students' experience. Benjamin Hadis, from Montclair University, performed a study in which he surveyed ninety-five students about their study abroad experiences. He then identified several key areas in which students experience changes and evaluated how many of the students actually felt that they had experienced those changes themselves. The first category identified was titled "Academic Focusing" (Hadis 60). Hadis wanted to find out if students were more focused on their studies once they returned from their host country. Surprisingly, only 48.9% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with this sentiment (Hadis 61). I had originally thought that more students would be more focused on

their studies after studying abroad. My thinking was that after being exposed to such a vast amount of new knowledge in a new culture, it would be much easier for someone to focus on studying when in a culture they know inside and out. However, it seems that the research shows otherwise.

The second area of interest, defined by Hadis, was interest in international affairs. Unsurprisingly, “[an] overwhelming majority of the respondents [expressed] that they [had] indeed deepened their interest in world affairs” (Hadis 61). This majority referred to was in fact 90.3% (Hadis 61), which shows that students are not only more aware of other cultures upon return, but are actively interested in staying up to date on international news once home. Staying up to date on international news is an increasingly helpful and necessary habit as people get older. Now, economies and societies are so intimately linked that a crisis in one nation can have a very large impact on several others. A prime example of this most recently is the Syrian Refugee Crisis. The war raging in Syria and in nearby areas is causing political feuds in Canada (Blatchford) and is causing countries like France and Germany to take in refugees by the tens of thousands. It has been my experience that when students are more engaged in international issues, they become more compassionate towards people in need, are able to make more articulate arguments, and are more open to new ways of thinking. In fact, nine tenths of the students Hadis surveyed agreed with the statement, “The experience of studying abroad has made me more open to new ideas” (Hadis 62).

Two other areas students saw major positive changes were in independence and in learning as its own reward. Nearly 80% of students felt that studying abroad helped them make their own decisions better (Hadis 62). As mentioned above, when a student is dropped in a nation with new cultural quirks, systems, and people, they need to adapt quickly and become independent. One could say that a form of independence is knowing for the sake of knowing. Over 50% of students agreed with the statement: “After I returned from studying

abroad, I found myself studying more for the ‘pleasure of knowing’ than to get a good grade” (Hadis 63). This is independence, in that students who feel this way no longer learn because someone has told them to, but learn for their own pleasure and can be self-guided in the learning process. These findings aside, the most interesting change students may go through is the way they view their own culture.

Reverse culture shock is a phenomenon in which people who leave their country for an extended period of time return and see their own culture in a new light. Over 60% of students in Hadis’ survey “experienced REVERSE culture shock...” (Hadis 62). This has many positive (though many negative) impacts, one of which is that students who return will think more about things they took for granted like snow. However, there are people who come to Canada who think snow is amazing because it’s something they’ve never experienced before. A Canadian graduate student who reflected on her study abroad experience once home said she “decided to embrace winter more, learned to ski, and tried to learn to skate” (Costello 53). Reverse culture shock not only teaches people not to take things for granted, but it allows for a higher level of critical thinking:

The very process that leads to developing an open mind abroad collides with the truisms one has left behind in one’s home society. When students return from studying abroad, they will face such truisms as manifested even by close friends. In this sense, experiencing a reverse culture shock entails discarding all preconceptions about the world, truisms about one’s home culture and society, and languishing for the active experience abroad one has just come back from. (Hadis 62)

What Hadis is saying is that students who study abroad are much more able and willing to dismiss cultural assumptions and look at ideas and situations more

objectively. Throughout high school and university, almost every instructor will explain the benefits and necessity of removing biases, thinking critically, and opening the mind. It is my belief that reverse culture shock can be the most important thing students will experience upon returning from studying abroad. Being able to view one's own society more objectively is a definitive advantage, and encompasses many of the positive changes outlined previously. Critical thinking is a valuable skill in the workplace, as removing biases allows for better interpretation of world events in the media, and opening one's mind to new ideas can help people decide on the best course of action in any and all endeavours.

A review of the research on study abroad will reveal many things. It tells us where students tend to travel and why they decide to go in the first place. It tells us of the challenges students face when wanting to study abroad, as well as reasons why they may not want to go in the first place. The research also gives us insight on reasons why the students appreciated and enjoyed their study abroad experiences, and the culmination of the results shows us the positive changes university students experience after they have studied abroad. These changes are most important to understand because we can then comprehend the true value of study abroad. Study abroad helps students succeed in their degrees and their jobs, opens them up to new cultures, increases their interest in foreign affairs, and even reintroduces them to their own culture. At the heart of it all, students transform after they travel. Our ancestors once walked the great plains of Africa and continued to travel across the globe. This innate instinct to explore continues to drive us forward. As students continue to travel across the planet, they will continue to change for the better by understanding other people and other cultures. They will begin to understand the importance of empathy and compassion, and of critical thinking and open mindedness. Overall, they will continue to learn what it means to be human.

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