Developing Employability through the Study Abroad Experience: a structured and supported activity to enhance international experience

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Summary

This project sought to intentionally target the development of international competence and global employability skills through the use of structured reflection in the Study Abroad programme. Focusing on the experiential aspects of international education, online interactive resources were developed to facilitate the meaning-making and self-directed learning processes of students travelling to the USA, Australia and South Korea.

The use of structured opportunities for reflection, a well-established tool in work-related learning at St Mary's University College, was adapted to meet the specific requirements of the Study Abroad programme. Guided reflection aims to provide students with flexible support in processing their experience, so that the desired learning outcomes are recognised, achieved and well-articulated by all, and not left to chance. The learning resources were designed to support and accompany students before, during, and after their Study Abroad experience.

The resources were developed incorporating qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with returned students, and through pre-departure questionnaires. The one-to-one interview sessions in themselves were conceptualised as a key tool for supported reflection, enabling students to review and articulate their progress once the programme is completed.

Data collected through the interviews shows that structured opportunities for reflection provide students with a safe space in which to consider the whole Study Abroad process and analyse it from a number of alternative perspectives. The intervention (online or face-to-face) of a tutor, formulating questions which they may not have previously considered but which could be relevant to an employer, stimulate students to go beyond the descriptive in order to trace connections between their experience and the development of a key set of graduate attributes. This then helps them to be prepared to reproduce these connections in an articulate way when navigating the global graduate job market.

Aims and objectives

- To develop an intervention for intentionally targeting the development of intercultural competence and global employability skills for those undertaking the Study Abroad experience.

Approach

We argue for an active role of HEI’s in facilitating students’ experiential learning and the development of graduate attributes through Study Abroad. Just sending students abroad and exposing them to difference does not automatically engender learning, as this requires their active engagement in conceptualising, processing, and making meaning out of the experience (Pedersen, 2010). This capacity for self-directed learning is variable across the student body (Kristensen, 2001). HEI’s have an opportunity to step in, so that the desired outcomes are recognised, acknowledged and achieved by all the participants. The tool we proposed to this end was the use of guided reflection implemented through interaction with a tutor, in face-to-face sessions and through online resources. Through this we hoped to exploit the potential of online technologies on the pedagogical level to enhance student mobility (ESMOS, 2004).
Activities

- Through three pre-departure workshops 2012/13 Study Abroad students were made aware of the potential learning outcomes of the experience. These also sought to engage students in the project. Students were introduced to structured reflection, and were asked to produce a journal/online portfolio while abroad. A focus group reflection on expectations was conducted.

- A Study Abroad module was set up on the home institution’s VLE for students to access while abroad, in order to support their production of reflective work, as well as to provide practical information on the programme.

- A ‘Celebrate the Study Abroad Experience’ event was organised after their return in Semester 2 of 2012/13. The aims were to connect the returned cohort with the new cohort departing in 2013/14, and to engage both with the following phases of the project.

- A Study Abroad online questionnaire for the pre-departure 2013/14 cohort was run, composed predominantly of open-ended questions. This constituted a guided reflection activity focusing on expectations, goals and measuring the level of intercultural competence. A self-assessment of skills and areas for improvement was also conducted. A pre-departure survey had been circulated the previous year too among pre-departure 2012/13 students, however response had been poor. Learning from this, the structure of the questionnaire was made more compact. A greater engagement of the International Office in its dissemination among the students was also utilised, and the response rate was 100%. Answers informed the development of the online resources.

- One-to-one reflective semi-structured interviews were conducted with returned 2012/13 students. Since fewer students than we had hoped engaged with the portfolio whilst abroad, the interviews took the place of the e-portfolios proposed in the original methodology. They were used to collect evidence of individual progress and to highlight emerging themes, as well as to collect data on the impact of structured reflection on the students’ ability to acknowledge and articulate their employability-related achievements. The interviews sought to explore the ways in which students did document and reflect on their experience while abroad with their own preferred modalities. Their feedback was used to modify the online resources and to improve students’ engagement, by diversifying the methods of documentation and reflections proposed to students to suit a wider range of learning styles. They also informed the restructuring of the opportunities for reflection into guided mini-activities subdivided into topics and timed throughout the experience, allowing for a regular interaction with the home institution.

The interview sessions were also conceptualised as a key tool for structured reflection in themselves, constituting a less burdensome instrument than a written journal/portfolio, suited to the requirements of a non-accredited module.

At the beginning of the interview, students were asked to comment on their Study Abroad experience as they might be required to do in a job interview. Afterwards, a step back was taken, as a more detailed exploration of their whole personal experience was undertaken, starting from the pre-departure phase. The underlying research themes adopted were the acquisition of intercultural competence and of global employability skills and the experiential aspects of study abroad through which these processes were engendered. At the end of the interview students were asked to again comment on the first question, as well as on the interview process.

The emerging themes and the degree of articulation reached by students in the interviews, together with the feedback on the sessions offered by them, were used to assess the achievement of the desired outcomes (see ‘Impacts’ section). As in Allen (2010) and Williams (2009), students’ perceptions and representations, rather than measurements of behaviours, were utilised as an assessment tool.
The impact of the experience on their employability that students traced throughout the interview tended to become more and more pronounced in their perceptions and narratives as the session proceeded. At the end, many students commented on the positive impact they felt the interview had had on their awareness of the progress made, and on their ability to articulate it for the benefit of employers (see ‘Impacts’ section). This points to the positive impact of reflective interactive sessions as a tool supporting students in recognising and articulating the positive outcomes of their experience.

An important adaptation of the reflective learning model for SA requirements was to conceptualise the interview as a key reflective tool in itself, complementing the reflection undertaken by students whilst abroad in their personal ways. Its character as a post-return tool ensured that it would not burden students during their adaptation to the new context. The one-to one oral set-up ensures the engagement of those students who experience difficulty in written reflection. In case of unavailability of resources for one–to –one sessions, a valid alternative would be constituted by small focus groups.

- The online resources were re-designed and supplemented incorporating suggestions, themes and audio excerpts resulting from the interviews.

- An online questionnaire for alumni was also designed. The questionnaire will be used in the future to continue to monitor the impact of Study Abroad and of the reflection process on future alumni who are now still students, exploring how they have benefitted from the reflective learning model’s application to the programme.

- A workshop was held with the 2013/14 cohort to introduce the modified online resources. Their engagement will allow for an ongoing continuation of the project, building on the work undertaken so far to further explore the potential of structured reflection for study abroad experiential learning.

Lessons learned
- We had asked students from the 2012/13 Study Abroad cohort to produce a portfolio or written journal of their experience. However, fewer students than we had hoped engaged with this exercise whilst abroad. In the interviews following their return, we sought to understand the reasons behind this and we subsequently modified the resources.

- The interview data suggested that the reflective learning model (which had been developed for work-related learning) had to be subjected to further modification to meet the Study Abroad specific requirements. The Study Abroad module is non-accredited, unlike the work-related learning modules available at our institution. Therefore, the production of reflective work was neither formally required from students nor assessed, but rested entirely on their good will. Some students expressed aversion at being requested to produce written work for extra-curricular reasons, and reported a clash with the considerable effort already required for adapting to a new context. Some students also mentioned narratives related to perfectionism, as the desire to produce exemplary work to showcase their experience, without any formal deadlines nor stages set by the University, had led to procrastination and finally to the non-completion of the task.

- Learning from these lessons, it was decided to offer students a wider variety of modalities for producing reflective work, in order to suit their different personal learning styles. Interviews sought to explore how 2012/13 Study Abroad students did record and reflect on their experience with their own modalities whilst abroad. The alternatives devised by students were subsequently incorporated in the resources.

- The task of reflection was also restructured in a series of guided mini-activities, for the students to choose from, organised in thematic sections and subdivided into the different time phases of the programme, in order to address the issues of excessive workload and of procrastination of a monolithic task. In future students will be reminded of these activities periodically through VLE messages and e-mails, following student’s advice to make it more personal and punctuated throughout the experience.
• Finally, an important adaptation of the reflective learning model for SA requirements was to conceptualise the interview as a key reflective tool in itself, complementing the reflection undertaken by students whilst abroad in their personal ways. Its character as a post-return tool ensured that it would not burden students during their adaptation to the new context. The one-to-one oral set-up ensures the engagement of those students who experience difficulty in written reflection. In case of unavailability of resources for one–to–one sessions, a valid alternative would be constituted by small focus groups.

Outputs
A Study Abroad interactive online module has been developed, on the home institution’s VLE. Alongside providing practical information, the module constitutes a step-by-step guide for reflection on the Study Abroad experience, targeting the development and articulation of intercultural competence and of global employability skills. It is designed to support and accompany students before, during, and after their experience.

The module has been developed incorporating the feedback on existing resources and other qualitative data collected from outgoing and returned Study Abroad students. It is structured into thematic sections, which correspond to the main themes which emerged from the interviews.

The themes are:
1) Recording and Reflecting
2) Organising the trip
3) Motivations and Goals
4) Challenges
5) Intercultural competence
6) Personal Development and Employability

Three types of resources are now available on the module:

1. Audio excerpts of the semi-structured interviews conducted with returned students. These provide examples of in-depth reflection, to in turn stimulate the reflection and the engagement of new Study Abroad students.

2. Mini-activities for guided reflection. The activities were developed incorporating the feedback collected through interviews. The activities were made accessible by offering students a choice between different modalities of documentation and reflection suiting a range of learning styles, and can be completed in writing, by video/audio recording, or though visuals. The activities are organised in thematic sections and subdivided into the different time phases of the experience. Regular interaction with the home institution via VLE messages and e-mail will remind students of the activities, and will allow for a regular reflection timed throughout the experience. The activities incorporate those questions and themes which in the interviews and in the pre-departure online questionnaire yielded more in-depth reflection. The resulting files can be uploaded on the module and exported to an e-portfolio, and then to a personal website. The files uploaded unto these destinations build up a record of the experience and a repository of evidence relating to the personal and professional development and learning processes undergone through Study Abroad.

3. Content based learning resources, organised into thematic sections, providing information as well as theoretical knowledge on the topics treated. These also include a wide range of external links.

An additional output is constituted by the online alumni questionnaire, accessible at:
http://www.survey.smuc.ac.uk/alumnisa [Accessed December 2013]
The questionnaire seeks to monitor the impact over time of the Study Abroad experience and of reflection. It will be administered to future alumni who are now still students, and who have benefitted from the reflective learning model’s application to the programme. We expect the impact on
employability to develop more fully and to become more evident after students graduate and engage in navigating the graduate job market.

Taking into account the feedback offered in interviews, a FaceBook closed group was also created, to complement online support on the home institution’s VLE. The group aims to further involve older Study Abroad cohorts in the preparation of the new ones, and to stimulate peer support, communication and team problem solving among members of the same cohort.

**Impacts**

The project has provided St Mary’s University College with a learning model to support students on Study Abroad. A tool has been developed which is specifically designed to facilitate the experiential learning of outgoing students, enhancing the quality of the Study Abroad experience. All students participating in the programme are enrolled on the online module, and are able to access the learning resources while abroad.

The 2012/13 Study Abroad cohort benefitted from an enhanced awareness of their progress related to intercultural competence and to global employability skills, and from an improved ability to articulate these positive outcomes, as has been shown through the qualitative data collected through the reflective interview sessions.

Students’ perception of the impact of the experience on their employability tended to become more pronounced in their representations through the interview process. Their narratives point to a number of skills as having consistently improved. These include confidence, drive to succeed, self-awareness and self-reliance, adaptability to a variety of situations, adaptability to different cultural environments and inclination to international mobility. A greater understanding of the culture of their host country, and of their own, also emerged. Students’ level of articulation of their personal development improved through the interview process, as they engaged in providing evidence and specific examples of situations to illustrate how they had developed the skills they mentioned.

The impact of structured reflection on the ability of students to acknowledge and articulate their employability-related achievements can be explored through the feedback offered by students at the end of the reflective interview sessions, an example of which is provided below.

Vanessa: ‘It’s difficult, sometimes, to explain the way you developed and things that aren’t always obvious, that if you don’t think about it after you get back, you might not benefit from it as well. Because it’s not something that you can see; it’s intangible’ ‘... Especially cause when you asked me the first question and the last question, it made me realise that I might get asked that in future and it’s probably best to know exactly how to tackle that. Cause that was a tough question. Even though I knew everything in my head, saying it was very difficult, so that might be something I need to work on, how to articulate what I’ve learnt from the experience... ‘.

The data collected from interviews was incorporated in the learning resources which were then made available to the following cohort. The resources will hopefully engage students in a regular in time/on site reflection throughout the experience. The expected impact of this is an improved ability for self-directed experiential learning across the student body, and an improved ability to articulate the progress made for the benefit of potential employers.

**Implications for the student learning experience**

The project sought to provide a framework for an intentional and active intervention of HE institutions in students’ experiential learning, establishing structured opportunities for reflection as a key tool for maximising the impact of Study Abroad as a learning opportunity. Such an intervention can be used to address the concern for quality, alongside that of quantity, in Study Abroad programmes.

The development of the online resources and face to face preparation acknowledges the pivotal role of intercultural development (Hammer & Bennett, 1998, 2002) in international education. However, the targeting of global employability skills allows us also to consider additional perspectives for linking Study Abroad more formally to other curricular goals (Rudd, 2012a; Rudd, 2012b).
The project is ongoing as the reflection carried out by each year’s cohort and the feedback provided will feed into the resources, which will continue to be modified accordingly for a better fit to students’ requirements.

Dissemination of the project results will allow the wider community to benefit from an enhanced awareness of the positive impact on students’ ability to achieve and articulate the desired learning outcomes, engendered by a more active intervention of HE institutions in structuring experiential learning. This will hopefully stimulate further innovations for exploiting the potential of reflection and online support in other international activities, as well as in any activity which can be developed into a structured experiential learning opportunity.

Future steps include a further evaluation of the impact of structured reflection on the ability of students to recognise and articulate their employability-related achievements, as students will engage regularly throughout the experience in guided reflection that is ‘in time/on site’ (Pedersen, 2010, p. 78) through the use of the newly improved online resources.

The online resources could be further innovated by developing real-life, country-specific cultural immersion assignments (Pedersen, 2010) to be included in the module and timed throughout the experience, providing students’ with ideas of activities they can engage in in their host country, in order to maximise their exposure to its culture. Further reflection activities and stimuli for group discussions with home or international students could be built on that.

The project findings will also inform future institutional interventions for the benefit of incoming and home students at St Mary’s University College. By developing structured opportunities for reflection and interaction between these two groups, we wish to support and stimulate the experiential learning of incoming students, and to provide an international learning opportunity to those home students who do not engage in Study Abroad.

Further impact assessment activities will also be carried out, by utilising the online alumni questionnaire that was developed, in order to explore the full extent in time of the impact of Study Abroad and of structured reflection on graduate employability.

The first cohort of outgoing Study Abroad students to whom the resources have been available, returned from their semester abroad in December 2013. These students are expected to provide reflective accounts of their experience and many have made use of the interactive resources and activities. Students will also be asked for feedback on the resources and on their experience. This feedback and an analysis of the reflections will be used to further develop the resources, to provide information for future outgoing students and to inform future interventions as described above.

Since much of the emphasis of this project was on employability, a longer term study will be undertaken to track outgoing Study Abroad students to assess the impact of this experience on their success following graduation.

Future efforts to build on the project could look at adapting the model developed to the specificities of other international activities, such as staff and student exchanges, placements, internships, volunteer experiences abroad and the Erasmus programme. Furthermore, the tool of structured reflection implemented through online resources can be applied to any activity which can be developed into a structured experiential learning opportunity, not necessarily related to internationalisation.

References and other resources


Additional Works Consulted


