

Short or Long Study Abroad? Cultural Distance May Be the Key

Swinder Janda

Kansas State University, USA

Abstract. With business schools increasingly emphasizing study abroad experiences within their programs of study, there is need for further research related to outcomes of such programs. Increasing cost of education and greater number of students working part-time has made shorter study abroad programs (one to two weeks in duration) more and more popular. However, do shorter programs provide outcomes similar to longer (over a month) duration programs? This study utilizes an online survey to answer this research question and focuses on two prominent study abroad outcomes: cultural intelligence and global mindset. Findings indicate that even though length of study abroad affects the two aforementioned outcomes, the more critical consideration when developing study abroad programs is cultural distance or the degree to which the study abroad location is to a country culturally different from the student's home country. Implications are provided for study abroad administrators and faculty-leaders.

Keywords: study abroad program duration, cultural intelligence, global mindset.

1. Introduction

With technological advancements in transportation and communication, the world has become ever more cross-culturally integrated (Owen and Quinn 2016). In this contemporary business world, institutions of higher education have been emphasizing global perspectives and experiences so students are prepared for a culturally diverse environment (Friedman and Miller-Idriss 2015). As such, educational programs have been incorporating an understanding of foreign cultures, the global economy, and the interdependence of nations (IIE 2019).

A recent study found that business organizations increasingly report a need for their personnel to “understand the global economic climate in which the firm operates, and have the communication skills, language and experience to be effective in international business.” (Daniel, Xie, and Kedia 2014, p. 25). From an educational perspective, a global outlook can be developed via taking an internationally oriented business course, travelling abroad, or participating in an international internship experience. Similarly, a study abroad experience can be a great way to enhance one's international perspective (Janda 2016; Janda and Janda 2018; Zemach-Bersin 2007).

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Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

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These trends emphasize the importance of research aimed at understanding the key outcomes associated with various types of study abroad experiences so that institutions of higher education may emphasize programs that are most effective in accomplishing key learning outcomes. As affordability of study abroad programs has been found to be one of the primary challenges for most students and often the main reason why most students do not study abroad before they graduate (de Jong, Schnusenberg, and Goel 2010; Janda 2016), a better understanding of program characteristics that are most likely to result in superior learning outcomes is a major key to engage more students and also obtain higher administrator buy-in for making study abroad an integral part of higher education. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has brought international travel including study abroad participation to a standstill during year 2020, once international travel opens up, students will likely be more interested in experiences which contribute toward enhanced career prospects. Furthermore, future study abroad programs will likely incorporate more virtual components such as students video conferencing with foreign hosts prior to international travel and students working on projects with counterparts at a foreign partner university via video conferencing prior to international travel.

With this goal in mind, the present study looks at how length of study abroad program affects two key student outcomes (global mindset and cultural intelligence). This was considered important as short faculty-led programs of 9-12 day duration are becoming increasingly popular both among students and institutions (compared to traditional semester study abroad programs), and such programs have been previously found to result in positive outcomes such as enhanced cultural competencies (Slotkin, Vamosi, Perez, Durie, and Eisenberg 2016). This study attempts to extend prior literature by empirically establishing whether length of study abroad program affects two comprehensive study abroad outcomes (global mindset and cultural intelligence). Furthermore, this study also looks at the moderating role of cultural distance (between the home country and study abroad host nation) in this context.

Rochfort and Borchert (2014) have noted the paucity of research related to the outcomes of business focused study abroad programs. Since their original call for additional research, several studies have recently looked at a variety of positive outcomes from study abroad programs such as cognitive, intercultural, and intracultural aspects of maturity and development (Opengart 2018; Terzuolo 2018); enhanced cultural capital (Slotkin *et al.* 2016); intercultural tolerance (Heffron and Maresco 2014); and enhanced communication skills and academic performance in college (Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015). These studies have all contributed toward an enhanced understanding of the outcomes of study abroad programs. According to a meta-analysis of 72 recent research studies investigating study abroad outcomes, Varela (2017) has classified these outcomes into three major categories: (1) cognitive or language acquisition; (2) affective or multicultural attitudes; and (3) behavioral or intercultural adaptation. Thus, study

abroad programs that can be designed to enhance all three areas would result in most desirable outcomes. Considering these three major outcomes of successful programs, a research gap still remains: What study abroad program characteristics can be designed in ways so as to enhance outcomes across these three major domains? What outcome measures to assess that tap into the three major domains and have previously been shown to affect one's effective functioning in international business settings?

The objective of the present study is to fill this research gap by empirically investigating how length of study abroad and cultural distance (as study abroad program characteristics) affect cultural intelligence and global mindset (as study abroad outcomes). These two specific outcome measures were selected as it has previously been shown that cultural intelligence reflects an individual's ability to effectively navigate in a cultural setting different from one's own (Earley and Mosakowski 2004) and global mindset reflects the characteristics which enable one to be an effective manager in a cross-cultural environment (Javidan, Teagarden, and Bowen 2010), both being reflective of success in international business settings. Additionally, the three sub-components of cultural intelligence (cognitive; emotional/motivational; and physical/behavioral) tap into the three major outcome domains (cognitive; affective; and behavioral) reported by Varela (2017). Likewise, the three sub-components of global mindset (intellectual capital; psychological capital; and social capital) also tap into the three major domains (Varela 2017).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the next section outlines the background literature, the concepts studied, and the proposed hypotheses. The subsequent section summarizes the measures utilized, data collection procedures, analyses and results. Finally, the discussion and implications of the results are outlined, along with avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

There is a significant amount of extant research focusing on a variety of topics relevant to study abroad. This section provides an overview of this research and particularly emphasizes research results related to outcomes of study abroad programs since that is the primary focus of the current study. Study abroad has been the center of a significant number of research studies delving into a variety of issues which can be broadly classified into four main areas: (1) institutional perspectives related to study abroad; (2) guidelines and ideas related to setting up and implementing study abroad programs; (3) student motivations, attitudes, and preferences related to study abroad program selection; and (4) benefits of and outcomes from study abroad programs. The following paragraphs provide an overview of these research streams.