

ENHANCING GLOBAL CAPABILITIES VIA STUDY TOURS: A JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This discussion paper considers the development and implementation of short-term overseas study tours for undergraduate students in business and business-related majors at Meiji Gakuin University (MGU), Tokyo. Previous studies demonstrate that students stimulate and expand their intellectual growth by participating in overseas study tours. As a result, study tours have been used by business faculties and schools around the world to provide students with international experience and as a means of broadening their cultural understanding. Even though Japanese universities and other educational institutions have been at the forefront of developing and participating in study tours, the available literature is predominantly North American centric. By contrast, Japanese academics and institutions have focused predominantly on the linguistic benefits of study tours producing a gap in the literature. This paper aims to address this gap and provide a Japanese perspective on designing and planning study tours as an effective learning tool for students in business and business-related majors.

Key words: short-term study tours, experiential learning, Japanese perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The global environment is becoming increasingly complex and interdependent. Given this interdependence it is imperative that to maintain harmonious international relations, economic prosperity and tolerance around the world that cultural understanding be promoted. One of the most effective

tive methods of promoting cultural understanding and awareness and an appreciation of the role of business in diverse cultural settings is to provide avenues to experience another culture first hand by engaging in 'study tours' and working with others from diverse cultural backgrounds (Ellington and Rice 1992, Wake 2011).

Study tours have been used by business faculties and schools to provide students with international experience and to broaden their cultural understanding. Japanese universities and other educational institutions have been at the forefront of developing and participating in study tours to various destinations. However, the available literature tends to be the North American centric (Howard, Keller and MacEwan 2010) or Japanese institutions tend to focus predominantly on the linguistic benefits of study tours. This paper overcomes the limitation within the literature by providing an insight into the Japanese approach to designing and planning study tours as an effective learning tool for students in business and business-related majors. Specifically this discussion paper considers the development and implementation of short-term overseas study tours for undergraduate students in business and business-related majors at Meiji Gakuin University (MGU), Tokyo, Japan.

WHAT IS STUDY TOUR?

What is a study tour? Within the literature there are several definitions, however the following proposed by Miao, captures the important facets of what constitutes a study tour: "...an activity of learning and researching through personal visits to one or more unfamiliar sites, where those sites (the human participants, their interaction, lifestyles, cultures) are the subject of study" (Miao 2006, p.219). Study tours have been used by educational institutions around the world to provide students with international experience and as a means of fostering their personal and academic capabilities. Previous studies have shown that participants on overseas study tours gain a number of benefits including improving perceived cross-cultural connectivity and professional development (Harrison 2006). Other benefits include: attaining global-mindedness, stimulating intellectual growth, and improving personal development such as maturation, self-awareness and independence (Hadis 2005). Whereas short-term study tours can be criticized as 'academic tourism', the Global Engagement Survey conducted by Page et al. (2010) demonstrated that study abroad experiences provided a long-term impact on students' lives regardless of the duration of the programs they participated in. The impacts include 'global engagement' (i.e. civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and voluntary simplicity) as well as subsequent educational and career choices (Page et al. 2010). Thus, the benefits of short-term study tours could go far beyond academic tourism if study tours are carefully designed.

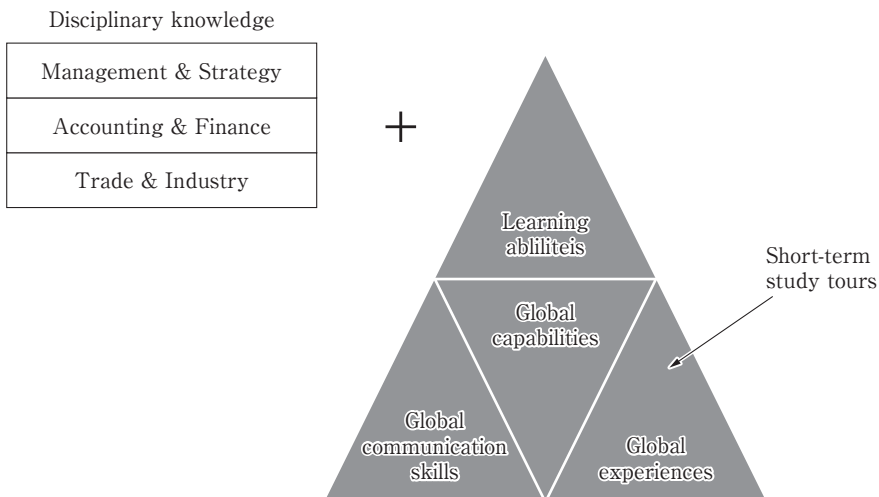
WHY DO WE IMPLEMENT SHORT-TERM STUDY TOURS?

While Japanese firms are increasingly looking for personnel with prior international experiences and a good command of English (Wake 2011), there has been a growing concern that young people are becoming inward-looking and hence Japan is facing a critical skills deficiency. Specifically “Japan lacks globally literate people capable of negotiating the challenges of international business” (Austrade 2011, p5.). Not only has the number of young Japanese going to foreign universities fallen by a fifth since 2004, but also young employees are becoming more reluctant to apply for overseas training programs and accept overseas postings (Yamamoto & Iwaki 2011). In responding to this problem, the School of Global Management, the Faculty of Economics at MGU designs it’s curriculum to equip business-major students with ‘global capabilities’ and/or ‘global literacy’ that are relevant to a contemporary global and sustainable business environment. Specifically, the School aims at fostering students with:

- knowledge and understanding of on-going change in a business environment,
- a global perspective in approaching and analysing current business issues,
- cultural understanding and awareness, and
- global experiences.

Short-term study tours are incorporated into the formal curriculum to complement disciplinary knowledge gained through class room learning. In study tours, it tends to promote cultural understanding and awareness, and to develop communication skills that are imperative to an increasingly globalised world (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Curriculum Design



WHO ARE THE PARTICIPANTS?

The School of Global Management in the Faculty of Economics run study tours during the summer and spring breaks for two weeks so as not to conflict with the general curriculum. Partner institutions are often selected based on the faculty member's personal networks as well as the reputation of the university. The costs are all born by participants, but the Faculty partially subsidies the program fees. Students will receive course credit upon the completion of the two weeks program.

Twelve short-term overseas study tours to the three English speaking countries (Australia, the UK and the US) have been undertaken between the academic year 2006 and 2010 with a total of 152 student participants. Of whom, 114 were females and 38 were males. Females tend to show greater interests in overseas study tours than male students. This tendency is not unique to our institution as a similar result was found in other Japanese institutions (Greer 2008). Nearly 70% of participants (n=106) were first year students, followed by second year (n=39), third year (n=7) and the final year (n=1). Due to the social pressure placed upon students to start job hunting as early during their third year, senior students are reluctant to participate in study tours. In addition, the School believes that providing students with the exposure to diverse cultures at an early stage of their college life will be effective.

Participants' levels of English vary. In the past two years, students who have had substantial overseas experiences (i.e. attended primary and/or secondary education in international schools abroad) are gradually coming into the study tours. However, a number of students with no prior international experiences continue to come into the program.

Students most typically expressed their reasons for undertaking a short-term study tour being:

- improving communication skills in English,
- general interest in host countries, namely, CULTURE, PEOPLE and LIFE STYLE, and
- broaden their perspectives to work in global settings.

HOW DO WE DESIGN STUDY TOURS FOR JAPANESE STUDENTS?

Four major components constitute our overseas study programs: these are: Academic components (e.g. lectures and student presentation), Corporate components (e.g. visits to company and

government organisations, corporate guest speakers), Cultural components (e.g. afternoon tea in the UK), and Business English components. Byosiere & Luethge (2010) argues that student involvement through a variety of exercises and experiences undertaken in a study tour is a key element to enhance student learning experiences. Moreover, the curriculum should cater for the appropriate levels and expectations of the participants. The following issues are taken into account in designing the curriculum:

- Given that Japan is known to be a high context culture where students do not explicitly expressing feelings and thoughts (Hall 1990), their reactions tend to be reserved even in a familiar environment,
- As Japan is known to be a group-oriented society (Hofstede 1997, Gudykunst 1991, Odaka 1986), students are reluctant express their own opinion and seek consensus before taking actions,
- Participants' English level varies. No screening process is employed using TOEFL or TOEIC scores given that it may deny opportunities for students who have no international experiences, but have growth potential, and
- Participants' are predominantly junior year students who have limited disciplinary knowledge and have little international exposure.

Based upon previous experiences, “good preparation” “group work” and “compare and contrast” approaches are found to encourage Japanese students’ involvement and overcome diverse English level. Furthermore, as Howard and Keller (2010) indicated, good communication with host contacts are essential in planning sessions, specifically in the case of MGU, between the coordinators of the host institution and the home institution and between coordinators of the host institution and individual lecturers. The later is particularly important in order to ensure that the contents of the lectures and courses catered for our students’ needs and levels. Partner institutions have substantial involvement in designing and planning programs in accordance with requirements of the home institution coordinator. Some of the activities and exercises that are employed in our study tours to encourage students to go out of their comfort zone and to maximize their learning experiences will be presented below.

For business major students, corporate components are the most important parts of study tours because this is how they learn about different approaches to business practices. Site visits are carefully designed to incorporate both corporate and academic components to increase the benefits of experiential learning. As for the Australian program, one of the site visits incorporates class room learning into experiential learning using an audio-visual case study. Specifically, a brief lecture con-

cerning international expansion strategies (involving market entry into the Japanese market) undertaken by an Australian winery is provided by the host institution faculty using an audio-visual case of the winery prior to the site-visit. Transcript notes are given to students to assist them in reviewing the lecture material and to overcome the participants' varied English level. While on-site, students learn about the production side of the business, followed by a presentation from corporate executives of the winery. Upon the completion of the site-visit, students are required to work in teams to answer a set of questions provided by the instructor regarding the marketing & management strategies of the winery.

Visits to government trade organisations such as JETRO (Japan External Trade Organisation) and Austrade (Australian Trade Commission) provide students with an overview of the host country by comparing and contrasting it to Japan. This includes the economic and investment relationships between Japan and the host country. If possible, the visit to these organisations should be used as a starting point for study tours given that students found it useful to learn from practitioners who have the sound knowledge of government and industry practices of the two countries. Moreover, given that the presenters in these organisations are often Japanese-English bilingual speakers, students with limited English language skills are likely to get courage to be involved in discussion.

Final presentation is a way to encourage students to become proactive learners and to gain confidence in presenting in English. Participants are required to give group presentations upon the completion of the study tour in front of academic members of a host institution. They are given an opportunity to prepare and practice their presentations prior to study tours. The instructor encourages students to choose a topic that highlights differences and similarities between a host country and Japan in the context of business (e, g, marketing, business practices, management strategies). In addition, students are encouraged to conduct a survey and/or interviews in the home country (pre-tour work) and then in the host country to contrast their views (on-site work). In this way, students are required to go out and interact with locals. The data they gather should be incorporated into their presentations. This exercise is beneficial in achieving learning outcomes such as improvements in language skills, broadening cultural understanding and most importantly gaining self-confidence.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON STUDY TOURS

The Faculty of Economics, MGU co-hosted an international symposium with Queensland University of Technology (QUT) titled "Enhancing cultural understanding via international study tours: Learning from the Japanese experiences" as a part of its 60th anniversary in 1 July 2011. The pur-

pose of the symposium was to provide a forum for academics and students to come together to:

- identify, discuss, and learn from the experience of MGU colleagues and students on what constitutes a successful study tour in broadening international and cultural understanding, and
- discuss and highlight the experience of international participants from Purdue University (USA) and QUT (Australia) in hosting and facilitating study tours.

In the following sections, some of the main issues raised in the symposium are reviewed, and then an assessment task to increase their learning will be proposed.

Prof. Greg Hundley, the Director of Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERS), Purdue University said in his key note speech that short-term overseas study tours can be seen as “the beginning of journey of cultural learning to students” and even as “transformative experience”. One student presenter said that by participating in a short-term study tour, she has learnt “the difficulties associated with living in other countries” as well as “the importance of people with diverse backgrounds learning how to cooperate together”. Further, this experience motivated her to apply for a long-term exchange program to enhance her learning and ultimately “to contribute to the society” and “to be made use of globally”.

During site visits, students enjoy meeting with Japanese expatriates working in the host country or host country managers who have work experiences in Japan. Students felt that having such opportunities helped them to enhance their interests in the academic sphere and prepare for future careers. They are particularly interested in finding out what kind of difficulties they faced in foreign countries and how they overcome the problems. Moreover, participants are able to broaden their perspectives and gain new ideas and thoughts by comparing and contrasting their own attitudes to those of locals. One student presenter said, “I found a striking difference between American students and myself [during the study tour]. Everyone there had an interest for Japanese culture, politics and economy. I was surprised by their positive learning attitude, and had to reflect upon myself”. Another student presenter also highlighted differences in attitudes to learning between Japanese and American students as the former being “inward looking”, “no self-confidence” and “low self-esteem” whereas the latter being “outward looking”, “confident” and “positive”. She went on to say, “the experiences I gained in the study tour broadened my horizon and made me think about my future”. As demonstrated, short-term study tours can provide an opportunity to heighten self-awareness by bringing a different perspective to education, career, and life. In addition, students are able to begin building up a global network of friends and colleagues they have formed during study tours and maintain it effectively by social media.

A study tour is also a way to develop self-confidence by taking the challenges of placing themselves in an unfamiliar setting. Mr. Rob O'Donovan, a former Senior Trade Commissioner in Australia, demonstrated in his presentation that “the journey itself is a learning experience”. One student said “the best fascination is that we can see the real situation with our own eyes. When I saw that, I realized that my outlook had been very narrow.” Other presenter noted that by participating in a study tour, he has learnt the importance of “going into the field” (experiencing the real world) and “having curiosity and courage to take on new challenges”.

In a series of discussions, we concluded that in terms of providing real world exposure and learning short-term study tours are a valuable means of achieving this. Study tours can be effective in:

- developing self-awareness & self-confidence,
- broadening own perspectives,
- enhancing cultural understanding,
- building networks, and
- fostering global mildness.

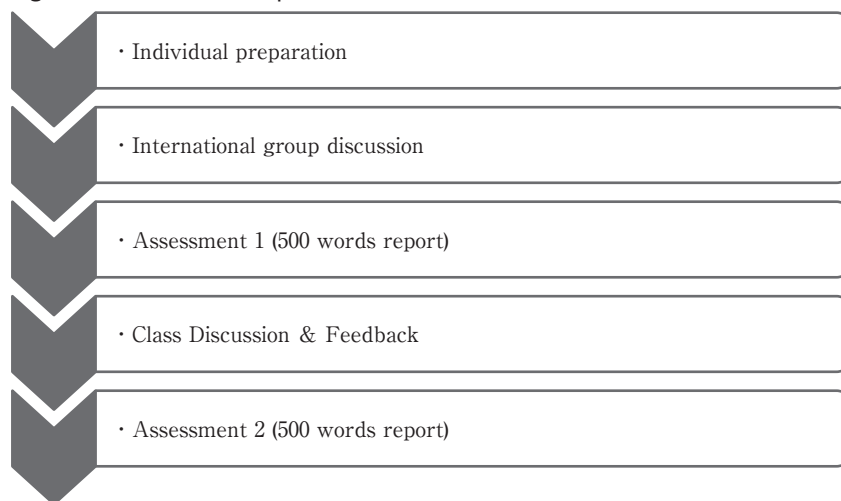
However, currently, few measures are in place to continue students' learning AFTER study tours. Thus, the following post-tour assessment is proposed by Dr. Yuka Sakurai, Lecturer, Faculty of Economics, MGU (the Author) and Dr. Rumintha Wickramasekera, Senior Lecturer, QUT Business School.

POST TOUR ASSESSMENT

In designing appropriate assessment tasks, students' needs and cultural backgrounds need to be considered in order to maximize learning. Thus, based on previous experience, in 2012 a trial will be undertaken on international group work between the home institution (MGU) and the host institution (QUT). It was decided that case study analysis would be the most appropriate assessment item given the advantage of experimental learning. Two case studies were produced; one based on a Japanese company, and the other an Australian company.

Students will take on the role of International Business Consultants. Students based at the host institution in Australia will analyse the Japanese case study and vice versa. In addition, they will act as consultants to their colleagues in Japan using email, Skype and Elluminate. The analysis will be based on the Ivey method of Case analysis. This method is undertaken in three stages, name-

Figure 2: International Group Work Assessment



ly individual preparation, small group discussion and class discussion. The class discussion will be recorded using a flip camera and a livescribe smart pen (records voice and written notes in a digitized format). The discussion, instructor's notes and verbal comments will be shared between the two groups for comment and feedback. This method has the added advantage of facilitating review at any time, improving feedback to students in a multimedia format. (In addition implementation is not reliant on synchronising the timetabling between the two groups of students).

Assessment will be based on two 500 word submissions. The first will be based on the first reading of the case study by the student without assistance. The second submission will be after the class discussion and feedback from the international collaborators (see Figure 2). The assessment can be used prior, on-site and/or post-study tours, but preferably to be used in post-study tours to maximize student learning outcome.

In addition, the proposed assessment would help to maximize the learning for students from both the home and the host institutions to enhance their international knowledge and broaden cultural understanding.

CONCLUSION

In terms of providing real world exposure and learning, study tours are a valuable means of achieving this. From the experience of our school, it is apparent that maximum benefit is gained by carefully planning the study tours and ensuring that they are suitable for Japanese students with little international exposure. It is imperative to impart some basic understanding of the country and the culture the students are visiting prior to departure. While in the country learning and under-

standing is maximized by having broad ranged interaction with the 'locals'. However this interaction should be continued after returning from the host country by engaging in activities such as international group work to maximize understanding. On-going collaborative efforts between the host institution and the home institution are required to achieve greater learning outcomes from study tours.

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