

Promoting Equity and Inclusion in Virtual Education Abroad Programs

Dr. Jennifer Teague

JTeague@purdueglobal.edu

Dr. Pam DeLotell

pdelotell@purdueglobal.edu

Purdue University Global

West Lafayette, IN

USA

Abstract: Known intercultural skill gaps exist for recent college graduates, but those skills gaps can be addressed through defined and intentional global learning experiences. Moreover, employers are more likely to hire graduates that have partaken in such experiences, underscoring the value of these programs to students both personally and professionally. Traditional global experiences have typically been delivered via short and long-term “study abroad” experiences, consisting of travel itineraries to foreign lands. This comes at great expense in terms of student time and financial cost, both of which are often in short supply for the typical online learner. Virtual global experiences can help bridge this gap for underrepresented and non-traditional students, making these opportunities available to a wider and more diverse population.

Introduction

The globalization of countries, companies, and consumers has accelerated the need for culturally adept individuals to engage in and with both diverse workforces and internationally focused organizations. Cultural, technological, and financial interdependence across nations has created skill gaps across many business disciplines. Employees often struggle to adapt to outdated corporate training and increasingly diverse workforces present in this new globally interconnected environment.

One of the emerging skills noted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers list as critical for career preparedness is intercultural fluency (NACE, 2021). However, the recent research from the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU) found that, while 54% of employers felt intercultural fluency was critical to workplace success, only 43% of employers felt recent college graduates possessed that skill (Finley, 2021). To add to these findings, 44% of employers indicated they were much more likely

TCC 2022 Conference Papers

to hire a graduate that had participated in a “global learning experience that included exposure to diverse experiences and perspectives” (Finley, 2021, p.10). Although these research results support a global learning experience, the opportunities for disadvantaged and non-traditional students are often minimal.

Considering that known intercultural skill gaps exist for recent graduates, that those skills gaps can be addressed through defined and intentional global learning experiences, and that employers are more likely to hire graduates that have partaken in such experiences, it follows that programs that highlight these skills hold great promise for students.

However, traditional global experiences have typically been delivered via short and long-term “study abroad” experiences, consisting of travel itineraries to foreign lands. This comes at great expense in terms of student time and financial cost, both of which are often in short supply for the demographically underrepresented online non-traditional learners.

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2021), in the 2019-2020 academic year, most study abroad opportunities were one or two-semester programs offered at the undergraduate level, with almost 60% of the destinations in Europe. Additionally, 70% of participants were white, and 54% of the funding was from personal and family resources (IIE, 2021). Indeed, the IIE research noted that fewer than 21% of the total U.S. population engaged in study abroad are of racial or ethnic minorities. (IIE, 2021). Virtual global experiences can help bridge this gap for students, making these opportunities available to a wider and more diverse population of learners.

Virtual Education Abroad

Universities engaging in virtual program delivery are positioned to create learning opportunities for their students to develop intercultural competence through more traditional curricular delivery. However, largely due to advances in virtual program options fueled by the Covid-19 pandemic, new possibilities are now also readily available to supplement less dimensional experiences with enhanced synchronous and asynchronous engagements designed to expose students to differences in the culture, political economy, and operating environments of global locations.

Much literature from just the last two years exists to support the efficacy of virtual global experiences, largely driven by the need to pivot traditional study abroad programs to a virtual format due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Coche, 2021; King et al., 2021; Torres & Statti, 2021). Success in advancing intercultural fluency is best achieved through the inclusion of an embedded curriculum focused on the development of both cultural self-identity as well as cultural values held by others (Bittinger, 2019; Hyett et al., 2019). However, many of the current study abroad options do not speak to the non-traditional, first-generation, or racially and economically diverse student body that makes up the non-

TCC 2022 Conference Papers

traditional student. As an example of this disconnect, Aslanian and Clinefelter (2013) noted that online students, overall, tend to be female, at least 35, and have family or work constraints that would prevent a standard study abroad program. More recent results support a continuation of the same demographic trends. In 2019, Clinefelter et al. found that 60% of online students were female, 43% between 25 and 39, with an average age of 32, and 55% single. Veletsianos (2020) also noted the non-traditional student which represents a significant portion of the completely online student population is 32-34 years old, female, working full-time, and attending either a business or health-based program.

According to the Forum on Education Abroad (FEA), recognized as the Standards Development Organization (SDO) for education abroad by both the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and Department of Justice, education abroad opportunities include programs such as individual courses, internships, service learning, and experiential learning that take place outside of the participant's home country (defined by either of citizenship or of academic residency) (FEA, 2020). Virtual opportunities mirror many of the traditional education abroad offerings,

Virtual programs are available in many forms, but the most common include *Collaborative Online International Learning* (COILs), which are typically offered as integrated online projects with the collaboration of students in two or more international universities. Students remain attached to their home university and course, but they work with students in a partnered university to complete a short-term project together. *Virtual exchanges* are also a popular option, allowing students to enroll in an international partner university's online course, receiving credit at their home university upon satisfactory completion. *Virtual site visits*, organized either as individual encounters or in multiples as part of a curated itinerary, allow students to both synchronously and asynchronously visit cultural sites and international companies, engaging with and exploring cultural, social, political, and economic differences. *Global virtual internships* allow students to gain resume-building applied work experience with real international organizations, sharpening both their cross-cultural skills and virtual teamwork skills at the same time. Finally, *global virtual service learning projects* often function as specialized internships focused on the non-profit sector.

These programs all have unique advantages, but overall, they each offer the development of cross-cultural awareness, intercultural fluency, experience in communicating and collaborating with diverse populations. Because they are delivered in a virtual format, they also offer the added benefits of awareness of the challenges present in working across borders in terms of navigating both time and cultural differences. Due to the lack of need to physically travel and reside in a foreign location, two additional but highly significant benefits are the reduced (and often flexible) time necessary for participation and the reduced student cost to participate. Stroud (2010) found that students cited issues such as personal and financial concerns as a reason for not participating in a study abroad program, and students engaged in a master's degree program are even less likely to

engage in a study abroad program, likely due to work and family obligations. Clothey (2016) corroborates this point in a survey of graduate students, finding that making time for a face-to-face study abroad program would be very difficult for most participants. Thus, the ability to offer both virtual and in-person education abroad opportunities has significant merit.

Framework for Equity and Inclusion in Virtual Program Development

Regardless of the format of the virtual education abroad experience, several key guidelines are suggested to ensure program delivery offers the maximum benefit, particularly to the underrepresented online learner. These suggested guidelines form a four-pillared framework for the creation of virtual education abroad programs.

Advocacy

Universities should create administrative representation and clear processes to encourage students and faculty to embrace virtual education abroad opportunities. Particularly for students who opt for online education, many issues can arise that lessen the opportunities for education abroad, including time, money, family obligations, and the ability to leave a job for a long length of time. While the Lincoln Commission (2005) argued that every college student should seek out study abroad opportunities, Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015) argued that general perceptions of the program, professional development, intellectual growth needs, cost, and demographic factors all play into the intention to actively seek out study abroad opportunities. Given the difficulty non-traditional or disadvantaged college students have in finding viable opportunities to engage in a global education, advocacy provides some guidance as to how institutions might accomplish that.

Academic quality

Universities should provide a rigorous and contextualized virtual education abroad curriculum through experiential, applied learning. This curriculum should include a focus on the development of cross-cultural awareness and communication skills to increase intercultural fluency. The profile of the typical study abroad student continues to be mostly white (more than 67%) and mostly female (67%) (Alcántara, 2021). Yet research clearly indicates that studying abroad helps students develop a sense of accomplishment, a connection with a larger global environment, an understanding of the diversity of the business world overall, and a sense of initiative and self-worth (Alcántara, 2021). Boronico and Boronico (2010) observed that in today's global environment, study abroad in some form is seen as a critical element in higher education in the United States, in part due to the U.S. geographic isolation. Although clear standards for education abroad opportunities have been introduced and updated by the Forum on Education Abroad (2020), virtual opportunities have yet to be addressed in detail. The

emergence of more online opportunities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to begin the development of virtual education abroad standards.

Accessibility

Universities should provide virtual opportunities to everyone, regardless of physical mobility. This includes ensuring that virtual delivery methods meet accessibility requirements. Lee (2017) posited that increasing accessibility within higher education is a multi-dimensional and complex problem, and this complexity calls for a more sophisticated approach. Accessibility includes not only possible physical limitations, but also access in terms of those who, for reasons of time, money, geographic location, or other situational factors, are limited in terms of education abroad opportunities. Offering virtual opportunities to immerse in a culture different from the ones students reside in can provide both encouragement to view the world through a more global lens and the desire to engage in other global experiences in the future. This is particularly true for non-traditional students who carry the weight of jobs, families, and other constraining factors which may prevent them (even if they have the financial means) from engaging in in-person global experience opportunities.

Affordability

Universities should provide virtual opportunities that are cost-effective and aid-eligible (where possible) to allow for participation by all students. Affordability of education abroad has long been an issue in creating an environment where more students have the opportunity to engage in global education. Lörz et al. (2016) determined that both social and economic inequality limit even the desire of some students to engage in a study abroad or education abroad program. Significantly lower intent in both of these groups results from previous life events, cost sensitivity, and a lack of awareness of the long-term benefits, all of which explains, in part, a lower intention to even explore a study abroad or education abroad program. This inequality is well documented in other research as well (Netz, 2015). Higher education institutions must begin to think of these global opportunities as critical in student education and development and provide opportunities for students to engage in these opportunities in a virtual environment.

The implications of both increased virtual opportunities in the wake of a global pandemic, and the lack of equal opportunity for non-traditional and disadvantaged learners are clear. Universities must begin to utilize resources to find new ways in which to offer short-term, virtual immersion opportunities for students which allow for work and family obligations and provide opportunities for those groups of students who have not historically been able to take advantage of study abroad opportunities. In doing so, universities will help prepare students to truly engage in a global business environment.

Program Example

While virtual education abroad is still an emerging area, the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated many traditional study abroad providers to create content and interactive

TCC 2022 Conference Papers

experiences that could be accessed online. While many colleges and universities have transitioned back to in-person travel experiences, some institutions have continued to offer virtual opportunities. As an example, Purdue University Global (PG) now offers a virtual faculty-led education abroad experience to run in parallel with existing short-term trips.

PG has created an education abroad elective course at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and the course is divided into three sections: preparation, immersion, and reflection. Virtual and travel students are enrolled in the same course section, and they interact via discussion boards, collaborate on assignments, and attend joint live seminars throughout the trip to create camaraderie between all participants. Virtual participants have a dedicated itinerary whereby they are offered asynchronous opportunities, including pre-recorded cultural tours and company visits. They are also offered a menu of synchronous events, including live tours in conjunction with students in-country as well as additional live events focused solely on the virtual students.

As an example, on a recent trip to London, virtual students joined a live company visit via Zoom with trip participants in London. This opportunity not only exposed students to corporate information but also provided them with cultural interactions and the opportunity to engage in international communication. Virtual participants also had the chance to participate in another Zoom session to learn about the role of the tea trade in British history and culture. They also met with an English businessperson to discuss cultural differences when doing business in the UK and US. All opportunities provided virtual participants contextualized and individualized experiences to promote a deeper understanding of the business and social culture of the foreign country.

Conclusion

Research indicates that online education continues to grow in popularity, particularly given the recent pandemic (Friedman & Wood, 2022). Creating equitable and inclusive virtual education abroad opportunities allows students from a multitude of backgrounds to participate in and grow from a tangible and engaging international experience. These virtual experiences address one of the most significant skill gaps identified by employers, thus giving program graduates a professional edge both on paper and in practice. Through the use of a framework for virtual program development which includes advocacy, academic quality, accessibility, and affordability, universities can help ensure that the graduates of the future have the cultural perspective necessary to engage in a global economy.

TCC 2022 Conference Papers

References

- Alcántara, A. (2021, March). Where do Latino students fit into study abroad programs? *Hispanic Outlook on Education Magazine*. <https://www.hispanicoutlook.com/articles/latino-study-abroad-programs>
- Aslanian, C. B., & Clinefelter, D. L. (2013). *Online college students 2013: Comprehensive data on demands and preferences*. The Learning House.
- Bandyopadhyay, S., & Bandyopadhyay, K. (2015). Factors influencing student participation in college study abroad programs. *Journal of International Education Research*, 11(2), 87-94. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jier.v11i2.9189>
- Bittinger, M. (2019). *An instructor's experiment: Adding intentional global competency into a pre-existing short-term study abroad program* [White paper]. Purdue University. <https://hubicl.org/publications/49/2>
- Boronico, C., & Boronico, J. (2010). Study abroad perspectives on institutional operations. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(4), 13-20. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v3i4.192>
- Clinefelter, D. L., Aslanian, C. B., & Magda, A. J. (2019). *Online college students 2019: Comprehensive data on demands and preferences*. Wiley. <https://universityservices.wiley.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/OCS2020Report-ONLINE-FINAL.pdf>
- Clothey, R. (2016). Increasing diversity in international education: Programming for non-traditional students through an alternative curriculum model. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 8(1), 22-35. <http://ijci.wccci-international.org/index.php/IJCI/article/view/27/26>
- Coche, R. (2021). Course internationalization through virtual exchange: Students' reflections about "seeing the world through the lens that is soccer". *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 76(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776958211014074>
- Finley, A. (2021). *How colleges contribute to workforce success*. Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/research/AACUEmployerReport2021.pdf>
- Forum on Education Abroad. (2020). *Standards of good practice for education abroad* (6th ed.). <https://forumea.org/resources/standards-6th-edition/>

TCC 2022 Conference Papers

- Friedman, J., & Wood, S. (2022, January 25). Discover 15 current online learning trends. *U.S. News*. <https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/slideshows/discover-10-current-trends-in-online-education>
- Hyett, N., Lee, K. M., Knevel, R., Fortune, T., Yau, M. K., & Borkovic, S. (2019). Trialing virtual intercultural learning with Australian and Hong Kong allied health students to improve cultural competency. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(3), 389-406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318786442>
- Institute of International Education. (2021). *2021 International education fast facts*. https://opendoorsdata.org/fast_facts/fast-facts-2021/
- King, T. S., Bochenek, J., Jensen, U., Bowles, W., & Morrison-Beedy, D. (2021). Virtual study-abroad through web conferencing: Sharing knowledge and building cultural appreciation in nursing education and practice. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 32(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10436596211009583>
- Lee, K. (2017). Rethinking the accessibility of online higher education: A historical review. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 33(1), 15-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.01.001>
- Lincoln Commission (2005). *Global competence and national needs: One million Americans studying abroad*. Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Fellowship Program. <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/report-commission-abraham-lincoln-study-abroad-fellowship-program>
- Lörz, M., Netz, N., & Quast, H. (2016). Why do students from underprivileged families less often intend to study abroad? *Higher Education*, 72(2), 153-174. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9943-1>
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2021). *Competencies for a career-ready workforce*. <https://www.naceweb.org/uploadedfiles/files/2021/resources/nace-career-readiness-competencies-revised-apr-2021.pdf>
- Netz, N. (2015). What deters students from studying abroad? Evidence from four European countries and its implications for higher education policy. *Higher Education Policy*, 28(2), 151–174. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2013.37>
- Stroud, A. (2010). Who plans (not) to study abroad? An examination of U.S. student intent. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(5), 491-507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309357942>
- Torres, K., & Statti, A. (2021, July). Expanding students' worldviews through virtual study abroad experiences. In *EdMedia+ Innovate Learning* (pp. 372-377). Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

TCC 2022 Conference Papers

Veletsianos, G. (2020). *Learning online: The student experience*. Johns Hopkins University Press.