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Learning abroad and graduate employability: challenges articulating international learning outcomes

Susan Oguro

University of Technology Sydney, Sydney
15 Broadway, Ultimo NSW 2007 Australia
Susan.Oguro@uts.edu.au

Beate Mueller

University of Technology Sydney, Sydney
15 Broadway, Ultimo NSW 2007 Australia
Beate.Mueller@uts.edu.au

Growing numbers of Australian undergraduate students are participating in short-term international experiences as part of their degree courses. In addition to any discipline-specific knowledge or skills learnt, such international programs provide students with the opportunity to develop graduate attributes such as intercultural communication skills and professional readiness for careers in globalised workplaces. To facilitate their transition to graduate employment, it is important that students are able to articulate the learning outcomes of international programs and apply them to professional contexts. However, this is a complex task for students that has not been adequately addressed in university learning programs. To address this gap, this paper reports on a study of the experiences of 55 undergraduate students from a range of disciplines who had completed a learning abroad program. It analyses interview data on the challenges students faced to connect their international experience with their future professions. Results indicate a complex range of potential challenges for individual students relating to their career management skills, developing professional identity, task-related performance issues, and perceptions of the relevance of international programs for employability. The paper establishes the necessity for universities to maximise the affordances of learning abroad programs by adequately supporting students to realise global graduate career opportunities.

Keywords: Graduate employability, Learning Abroad, Reflection

Introduction

Providing opportunities for university students to participate in a ‘Learning Abroad’ (hereafter referred to as LA) program within their degree is not a new phenomenon, with traditional models of semester-based international exchange study programs in place in most universities for decades. However, in the past few years, there have been substantial increases in the number of students participating in short-term international programs of between two and seven weeks duration often outside regular teaching periods (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2019). A variety of models for short-term programs is now available to students from most disciplines including fieldwork trips, seminars at an international partner university, internships or practica.

Such LA experiences are generally viewed positively with many students seeing the benefits of these experiences over traditional classroom learning (L. Tran, Stafford, Thao, & Rahimi, 2019). In addition to discipline-specific knowledge or skills students acquire, research has demonstrated that the international context of learning can also lead to outcomes related to intercultural understandings and communicative competence, second language proficiency development and global-mindedness (Benson, Barkhuisen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012; Deardorff, 2009; J. Jackson & Oguro, 2018). As universities seek to prepare their graduates for careers in globalised workplaces, evaluations of LA programs have identified positive employability outcomes for graduates (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Jones, 2013; Potts, 2015, 2018; Turos & Strange, 2018) including some enhancement of rates of graduate employability for students who have participated in study abroad (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017).

In order to maximise the significant investment in LA programs, it is vital that students receive the appropriate pedagogical support to meaningfully reflect on and articulate the transferable skills they have developed to potential employers and apply them in their graduate roles. However, this is not a straightforward process and not all learners find it easy to communicate the professional applications of their international learning experiences (J. Jackson, 2014; L. Tran et al., 2019). As this gap is identified, many universities worldwide are implementing comprehensive preparation, mentoring and post-sojourn programs to help students maximise their international experiences (J. Jackson & Oguro, 2018; L. Tran, 2013). It is imperative that universities are not complacent with simply dispatching students for a period of time abroad, but that they interrogate how student learning can be best scaffolded to maximise their achievement of expected learning outcomes (Gozik & Oguro, forthcoming). To address this, the study reported here collected and analysed the experiences of undergraduate students on their approaches and the challenges they faced to articulate their professional learnings after returning from a LA experience. To contextualise the study, the section below outlines relevant literature on graduate employability and employability skills, reflective practice and career management skills.

Literature review

Graduate employability and employability skills

The ability for students to find meaningful employment upon graduation from university is naturally a key concern for the sector. Graduate capabilities and employability are core to many universities' strategies and their performance in this area contribute to high-stakes assessment in many global university ranking schemes. Widespread curriculum initiatives such as Work Integrated Learning are also evidence of the focus of the sector on employability.

In researching the complexities of employability, scholars such as T.T. Tran (2019) have argued for a more comprehensive look at employability beyond just discipline skills and knowledge to also take into account other stakeholders and variables. These include individual student characteristics (Clarke, 2018; Daniels, Stewart, Stupnisky, Perry, & LoVerso, 2011), employers' perspectives (Kinash, Crane, Judd, & Knight, 2016; Molony, Sowter, & Potts, 2011), and the perceived market value of the profession (Bargsted, 2017). Significant work on graduate employability by Holmes (2013), D. Jackson (2016b) and Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012) has also established that while students develop skills and knowledge in their disciplinary areas throughout their degree programs, it is important to acknowledge that their professional identity develops while being part of different communities in and outside universities.

That employability comprises more than generic or discipline specific skills is also supported by Bridgstock's (2009) assertion that graduates also need to learn how to actively manage their careers. She highlights the importance of self-management (of one's values, abilities, interests and goals) and career building skills (knowledge of professions, markets and skills to advance in career) as additional capabilities that need to be included into curricula and subject designs as well as in individual student-focused approaches. To be able to learn, display and use these skills to actively manage one's career is seen as key to lifelong employment and career satisfaction.

Under investigation in this study is how students link aspects of career management, their building of a professional identity and reflection on their learning of employability skills through an international experience. To foreground the challenges students face to make these connections, the following section provides a connection of the literature on the value of experiential learning and reflection, linking to LA contexts.

Experiential learning and employability through learning abroad

Understanding employability beyond a specific set of skills is a process of transformation and learning in which the learner actively makes sense of experiences and learns to draw connections to their professional self for lasting personal, societal and organisational impact. Learners employ this ongoing process throughout their lives as part of their lifelong learning endeavours, employability and career management. Experiential learning (D. A. Kolb, 1984) has established that observing and reflecting on experiences creates abstract concepts that are the basis for adaptation, new knowledge, and behaviour (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This naturally also applies to international learning contexts where learners can be encouraged to reflect on the implications and uses of their new knowledge and experiences (Molony et al., 2011; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; Roberts, Conner, & Jones, 2013; Strange & Gibson, 2017) after their return home.

Recent research (Green, King, & Gallagher, 2019; L. Tran et al., 2019) highlights that students need to learn how to identify their learning through international experiences to employers, that is, to reframe 'travel stories' into 'career stories' (Green et al., 2019, p. 34). As employers and recruiters do not necessarily appreciate the value of LA, it is desirable for universities to help enable students to articulate their learning in professional ways (Green et al., 2019; Kinash et al., 2016; Turos & Strange, 2018). Moreover, an important aspect in the learning cycle (D. A. Kolb, 1984) is that new experiences are interpreted on the basis of previous ones. However, many university students have never studied abroad before nor perhaps thought extensively about their professional selves, career development or presenting themselves in job interviews or professional environments. This study explores these challenges.

The study

Context and participants

The research in this article draws from a larger learning and teaching project investigating undergraduate students' transitions from learning abroad to professional employment. This component focusses specifically on discovering the challenges students face connecting their LA experiences with their future professional selves, and in particular, how they reflect on their experiences and are able to articulate their learning outcomes.

Undergraduate students enrolled at a comprehensive urban university in their second year of study or above can choose to undertake short-term international experiences as part of a for-

credit and assessed elective subject. The subject aims to facilitate students' critical exploration of their experience by focussing on intercultural learning, developing reflective skills and applying their learning to their professional self. Students from all faculties of the university may enrol in the subject and choose from a range of LA programs in non-Anglophone locations in Europe, Asia and South America. Depending on the particular program, students are abroad for between two to five weeks during the summer (outside the main teaching semesters of the university). Programs vary by location and include different types of experiential learning such as fieldwork, coursework at international partner institutions and internships. As part of the subject, students are required to attend face-to-face seminars and complete online activities both before and after their participation in the LA program, and submit assessments focussed on intercultural and professional learning.

This study focuses on how students approached the final assessment task for the subject known as the *Professional Application* which is conducted after their return to Australia. This oral task simulates a job interview where students are required to professionally present on their learning gained while abroad. To prepare for the task, students undertake activities to scaffold their reflections to assist them to organise their responses. To encourage students' development of career management skills, they are also asked to locate a job advertisement which they are potentially interested in, to apply their learning reflections to a particular position. This component of the task aims to help students identify specific requirements of their field that they might link to their LA experiences.

Research methods

As identified in the review of research literature, most students need explicitly designed curricula on reflection and articulation of learning in professional ways. To collect data on this issue, semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit from students how they prepared for the *Professional Application* task and what (if anything) they found challenging. The interviews were conducted by research assistants not involved in the teaching or assessment of the students and took place immediately after students had completed the task with the aim to maximise student participation and accuracy of their recollections. Written and verbal information provided to students confirmed that their participation was voluntary and would have no impact on their assessment mark. This design decision was taken with the aim to maximise students' factual responses; however, it has limited the ability of the study to compare collected responses to actual student performance.

All 98 students who had completed a short-term LA program over the summer semester 2018/19 were invited to participate. Fifty-five students (17 male, 38 female) from the disciplines of Business, Science, Design, Social Sciences, Law, Engineering and Information Technology accepted the invitation and were interviewed after they had attended their final return seminar class for the subject. Interviews ranged from 5-10 minutes in length, driven by how extensively students chose to respond. All were digitally recorded, summarised and transcribed. Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the responses extracted common themes and significant trends following a double-coding process. In the reporting of student comments below, participants are identified by a number, disciplinary area and location of their LA program.

Findings

Students' initial responses to an introductory item in the interviews on whether they found the task difficult were mostly categorised as 'not difficult' or 'not too difficult'. However, upon deeper probing on specific areas, students elaborated on their responses and identified much

greater complexity and a number of areas of challenge, with many students concluding that the task was indeed difficult. The thematic coding process of participant responses identified three key categories: career management skills and professional identity, task-related performance issues, and students' perception of the relevance of the international program to their professions. Each theme will be discussed in turn below using sample comments to illustrate the sense of student responses.

In terms of career management skills, a comment such as "I hadn't been in many of these situations in an interview that I could draw on" (S7, Social Sciences, Japan) suggested that preparing for this task was difficult for those students who had only little or no perception of their career path or who had no experience with applications and job interviews. Unsurprisingly, many of the students expressing similar views were not yet employed in their disciplinary field and are presumably at an early stage in their professional identity development. As a result, many of them reported challenges not only in locating a relevant job advertisement but also in being able to describe the relevance of experiences abroad: "You have to think about the vocabulary you use when talking about it" (S5, Social Sciences, Spain). Furthermore, there were many comments from students concerning not feeling clear about the particular structure required in interview answers or how to communicate experiences appropriately, with some students describing the situation as 'overwhelming'. However, there was also acknowledgement that the support materials and classroom activities assisted them to overcome this:

I feel like I could apply for jobs now, because I know how to talk about my Philippines trip now, because it was such a big and important trip, I didn't know how to communicate it properly, because it was so overwhelming. But from this, I know how to talk about it now (S14, Social Sciences, Philippines).

The second key theme emerging from the data involved challenges the students identified in the type of task they were being asked to complete, and their experience or confidence with oral presentations and performance in an assessed situation. Responses questioning their own oral communicative ability were collected from students of all discipline areas; however, this was more evident from students from the Science discipline where they saw themselves having limited experience to draw on: "It is a bit difficult for me because I'm a science student. There is a little less focus on communication and a lot of what we do is writing and publishing data" (S9, Science, Cambodia). While the following comment is also from a student studying Science, it represents the burden expressed from students in all disciplines to perform in assessment tasks: "It's a lot more difficult when you practice it with another person then when you just practice it with yourself" (S13, Science, Cambodia). More specific challenges reported with the task type and requirements concerned the difficulties students felt firstly selecting what specifically to speak about from their extensive international experience, and secondly the challenge to verbally summarise: "The main thing I was concerned about was trying to explain everything that I had learnt in four minutes, there is just not enough time to talk about everything you learnt and experienced" (S6, Social Sciences, Vietnam).

In contrast, the few students who maintained throughout the interview that the task was not difficult expressed that they did not feel the need to prepare for interviews, as they considered employers preferred spontaneous answers. Some of these students however reported that they did not prepare for the assessment and that they therefore struggled with structure, timing and coherence.

The third key area of challenge emerging from the data related to issues students had linking their specific international program and their disciplinary area or future profession. While there was general satisfaction with the programs undertaken, there were still some students who felt their program did not match their expectations, particularly in relation to their degree. Some expressed challenges finding connections between the diverse cultural and linguistic contexts they experienced and their professional field, which they did not perceive as matching, for example: “I found it hard to explain a lot of the Japanese concepts that I got from Japan and relate it to Programming. It’s a completely different spectrum” (S10, Information Technology, Japan). Such comments suggest the challenges students have to reflect on and synthesise the value of the LA experience in terms of new knowledge explicitly useful for their future profession in addition to the experience and skills gained through interacting in diverse communities. This was also evident in students who had previous extensive knowledge or experience with the host location chosen and reported fewer challenges and reduced value in the international experience: “Living overseas is a bit easier for me. The culture was very similar to my mother’s land, so I adapted to it pretty well. To be honest the challenges that I faced were only one or two. So it’s a bit hard to find anything other than cultural or language barrier” (S3, Science, Cambodia).

In relation to an overall analysis of the participant profiles, the data did not indicate any clear patterns that students’ gender, degree or destination played a role in how they reported their experiences of articulating their learning outcomes. As a limiting factor to this study, it must be acknowledged that the relatively small sample size (n=55) and the necessary inclusion of short interviews have not enabled a comprehensive finding in this area to be established.

Discussion and future directions

The collected student experiences have demonstrated that reflecting on, summarising and verbally communicating learning outcomes from an international experience is indeed challenging for undergraduate students and worthy of investigation if universities are to provide appropriate curricula to maximise the opportunities and learning for students. While not all students individually reported all the challenges identified in the data, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of possible issues for students from aspects of career management, inexperience with job interviews or reflective tasks, and perceptions of the relevance of diverse global experiences for particular professions.

Through the data collection interviews, students were engaged in active learning and construction of new knowledge. Students at first did not admit much difficulty with the task, but then reflected more and recalled numerous aspects and challenges. This points to the value of the process of going back and forth in their thinking, struggling and resolving conflict, progressively making sense of the task and their experiences, all of which are important steps in the experiential learning cycle (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The findings further show how students think about their experiences and hence learn to articulate them. Variations in personal experiences internationally, ways in approaching and understanding tasks, previous job and interview experiences, different degrees and career choices were all shown to make a difference in how students approached the task and hence their learning.

This study has confirmed that earlier findings from research in the field of graduate employability in the domestic higher education context is applicable in international education programs as well. Bridgstock’s (2009) work established the importance of career-management skills for students which are echoed by the students in this study who also are challenged by

inexperience finding and understanding the requirements of job advertisements, knowing what employers want to hear, interview skills and using professional language. The students in this study were in their second or third year of studies and showed little exposure to career-related knowledge or skills development, a trend that Bridgstock (2009) also observed a decade ago.

The students returning from an international learning experience reported difficulties articulating particular skills or understandings and connecting their learning outcomes to their employability. This also strengthens findings from employability studies such as D. Jackson's (2016b) on the importance of a student's pre-professional identity concerning knowledge, skills requirements and the application in their field. Students in this study indicated they had not previously considered their professional future and therefore had not thought about the requirements of their field. Those students who had already secured some employment in their career field alongside their university studies, naturally found fewer challenges as their professional identity was presumably more developed. In either case, providing students with support to reflect on and express their learning gained from international experience is paramount, a conclusion that Green and colleagues (Green et al., 2019) also drew.

To address the gap identified in the research literature, this study focussed on analysing students' reports of the challenges they had preparing for and completing an assessment task requiring linking international learning outcomes and employability. It did not aim to evaluate students' performance nor correlate performance in the assessment task to their comments. This would naturally be a useful next phase of investigation. However, for those students who chose to comment on their performance in the assessment task and judged themselves as under-performing, it is noteworthy that they reported underestimating the task and being challenged to coherently structure their comments within the timeframe. Furthermore, concrete knowledge or technical skills were often in the forefront of students' thinking about the task and only when pointed towards employability skills did they become aware of other kinds of learning outcomes. This echoes D. Jackson's (2016a) findings that skills transfer across disciplines is often more difficult for students to become aware of and requires deeper engagement so as not to go unnoticed.

This study has highlighted that when identifying the employability value of short-term learning abroad programs, undergraduate students face numerous challenges to reflect on and name specific learning outcomes, link them to international experiences and articulate a summary professionally. In addition, factors such as students' inexperience with career-management, unclear career goals, and uncertain perceptions of the value of international opportunities also contribute to this complexity. As educators, these findings can naturally inform our curricula development, teaching and assessment practices. Given the range of challenges identified in different combinations for individual students, a variety of materials and activities is warranted. The students in this study showed that they approach this type of task on their own terms so the learning design also needs to be flexible enough to accommodate their personalisation and subjective perceptions of their learning and employability.

As Bridgstock (2009) advises, we recommend encouraging students early in their degrees to consider their professional identity and career management in order to maximise their learning outcomes. An integrated and staged process across the curriculum and embedded at subject level is ideal. With regard to the increasing numbers of students engaging with Learning Abroad programs across the sector, this study has confirmed that embedding reflective learning is essential if universities wish to claim the global-oriented graduate attributes often ascribed to such initiatives. Relying on measuring achievement in this area only in terms of the numbers

of students participating in learning abroad is insufficient and undervalues the education our students need to engage in global careers after graduation.

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