

The complex challenges of delivering a university-wide intercultural mentoring program for study abroad students

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(1) Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing focus across the Higher Education sector towards incorporating internationalisation initiatives into strategic planning and institutional goals. One component of this attention to internationalisation has been the significant increases in the number of students undertaking an international experience (including periods of study abroad, service-learning programs or international internships) as part of their degree programs. These international educational experiences are generally viewed positively and assumed to be transformative for students and leading to a range of outcomes including intercultural understandings and communicative competence, second language proficiency development or enhanced employability and global-mindedness.

As this trend of expanding international educational opportunities continues, it is imperative that universities are not complacent with simply dispatching students for a period of time abroad, but analyse the design and structures of study abroad programs to determine the specific pedagogic practices which contribute best to learning outcomes being achieved (Gozik and Oguro, in press). This chapter critically explores a comprehensive academic mentoring program implemented to support students' development of intercultural awareness and skills through their participation in a semester-long study abroad sojourn. While the program has been positively evaluated over consecutive semesters by students and external

stakeholders and could be presented as a positive case study, instead this chapter focusses on the broader institutional-wide challenges of implementing such a comprehensive mentoring program across multiple disciplinary areas and examines the ongoing challenges of the sustainability and scalability of such programs.

(2) Literature review

This review briefly outlines the research literature that explores assumptions about students' intercultural development in study abroad contexts, and the calls for specific pedagogical interventions to ensure desired learning outcomes are achieved. It also explores the literature on mentoring as one approach for providing academic support to students before, during and after international experiences.

(2.1) *Intercultural development through study abroad*

A period of study abroad is commonly assumed to contribute to the development of students' intercultural competence by providing the opportunity for them to engage with members of the host society, experience other cultural practices or traditions and develop the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people with different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2012; Fantini, 2019; Jackson, 2014). However, there is long-standing evidence in the research literature that the social networks of study abroad students are not extensively with local students (Coleman, 1997; Conacher, 2008; Milton and Meara, 1995; Willis et al., 1977) and indeed that study abroad students' engagement with the host society may not spread beyond university or retail staff in the host location (Dervin, 2009). Thus, while study abroad students might have some exposure to local culture(s) and practices, the potential for deeper understanding is limited, suggesting that

many of the common aims of internationalisation are not being realized by simply increasing participation rates in study abroad programs (Brown, 2009; Leask, 2009; Montgomery, 2010).

In response to this situation, a growing body of scholarship has advocated for the inclusion of comprehensive academic support or mentoring to ensure learning outcomes are achieved (e.g. Gozik, 2014; Jackson, 2017; Jackson and Oguro, 2018a; Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou, 2012). Specifically, study abroad scholars are advocating intercultural interventions in all phases of students' experiences (pre-sojourn, in-sojourn, post-sojourn) and seeking to track the intercultural learning of study abroad students over these phases to connect research to teaching practice (e.g. Beaven and Borghetti, 2015; Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Jackson, 2015; Jackson and Oguro, 2018b).

(2.2) Intercultural mentoring in study abroad

To maximise the benefits of a period of study abroad and in particular to support students' intercultural development, one model undertaken by universities is to incorporate a purposeful intercultural mentoring program for students. As Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012) have argued, most students learn to learn effectively while abroad 'only when an educator intervenes, strategically and intentionally' (p. 19). In such an intercultural mentoring program 'the mentor provides ongoing support for and facilitation of intercultural learning and development' (Paige, 2013, p. 6). Depending on the specific intended learning outcomes, the program could include the promotion of students' self-awareness and confidence in interacting in the language of the host society as well as encouragement to diversify their social networks (Jackson and Oguro, 2019).

Multiple possible models to deliver intercultural mentoring to students as part of their Study Abroad program are examined in the research literature. These include models incorporating face-to-face workshops or seminars during pre- and post-sojourn periods (Borghetti and Beaven, 2018; Dervin and Härkönen, 2018; Hepple, 2018) or through academics from the home university accompanying or visiting students during the study abroad period (Giovanangeli, Oguro, and Harbon, 2018; Hoult, 2018). Further models incorporate information and communication technologies to allow for remote mentoring using synchronous and/or asynchronous communication (Jackson, 2019; Lee, 2018). One common theme found in these studies from diverse learning contexts is the individualised nature of students' intercultural development and the value of programs which scaffold students' cultural reflections (both on their own values and practices of those of the host society). These findings underline the benefits of an individual mentoring program to maximise the value of a study abroad experience.

The research literature also demonstrates that irrespective of the mode of delivery, the scaffolding of complex intercultural learning outcomes for students requires the mentor to possess highly developed skills. Felten et al.'s (2013) research on various mentoring communities in the higher education sector highlights the importance of mentoring practices which go beyond simply imparting information and advice or proposing solutions to students. Instead, they argue that the mentor's role is to facilitate a space for discussion in which the mentee is able to seek guidance, problematise concerns and share ideas to subsequently form their own reflective responses. Jackson and Oguro (2019) have also argued that building a climate of respect and mutuality is crucial for a constructive mentoring relationship so that the mentor serves as a facilitator, motivator, resource, and guide for the student. Such requirements demand a commensurate level of expertise for the educator / mentor.

(3) Research context and methods

The research reported in this chapter is a qualitative case study focussing on the implementation and sustainability issues of providing an institution-wide mentoring program for university students undertaking a semester-long period of study abroad as part of their degree program. In outlining the steps undertaken to establish the program and an analysis of complexities and challenges, the chapter aims to assist academic and administrative leaders in higher education working with similar organisational goals for their study abroad programs. The program in focus here is titled ‘Mentoring Intercultural Learning through Study Abroad’ (hereafter referred to by its acronym ‘MILSA’), and has been in place at the University of Bern in Switzerland since 2016. The university is a large, comprehensive public university located in the nation’s capital with a strong research and teaching reputation. The MILSA program was initiated in response to the needs identified in the research literature as reviewed above, namely that if institutional strategies of internationalisation include the goals of facilitating students’ intercultural development and skills through study abroad programs, then an intentional program of mentoring for students is necessary. At the University of Bern, students’ Study Abroad location is at one of the international partner universities under a bilateral exchange agreement. Students travel unaccompanied, enrol in a program of study at the host university alongside local students and usually receive academic credit for their degree from the University of Bern. Before the MILSA program commenced, students’ study abroad programs included little or no explicit mentoring of potential intercultural challenges students may need to face, nor support to maximise the opportunities afforded through studying abroad for students’ futures.

Since its inception in 2016, the MILSA program is offered to students from across the university undertaking a study abroad semester. To date, forty-seven students studying disciplines as diverse as Economics, Law, Biology, Psychology, Computer Science, Theatre

Studies and Languages have participated. The program comprises a series of face-to-face workshops with students during the pre-departure and post-sojourn phases of their study abroad and also supports and mentors the students throughout the study abroad period through interviews, emails, blogs and peer group tasks. Each intervention is connected by the overarching and interconnected themes of expectations, cultural practices, language learning and intercultural experiences.

Students are mentored to reflect on and further develop these themes from the first face-to-face workshop before departing on their period of study abroad, throughout their sojourn, and in follow-up workshops, reflections and evaluations at the end of the program. A facilitator based at the home university in Bern mentors students while they are abroad. In addition, students are connected with their peers also on a study abroad program (although usually in a different location globally) to complete a series of peer mentoring activities. Theoretically, the program's various components and approach draws on the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb and Kolb, 2017; Kolb, 1984) comprising the interconnected phases of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Further details on the components of MILSA can be found at the program's website (University of Bern, 2019).

As stated above, the MILSA program has consistently received broadly positive feedback from participating students and key stakeholders since its inception and this chapter could have presented it as a case study of successful practice and demonstrated the student learning outcomes. However, to offer more to study abroad researchers and administrators, particularly those reviewing or considering implementing a mentoring program in their own institution, the chapter instead focuses on the challenges of implementing and sustaining a comprehensive university-wide mentoring program for study abroad students. The chapter is also a response to calls for the international higher education field to move beyond

documentation of students' 'happy stories' (Clifford, 2018) and instead to make explicit the challenges of facilitating meaningful intercultural learning programs around the study abroad experience.

In order to highlight for the study abroad field the broader program design and institutional management issues of a mentoring program, the chapter draws on data collected through online surveys of twenty-eight student participants who completed the MILSA program in three different semesters (a two-year period). In addition, the perspectives of university staff involved in the delivery, administration or management of MILSA were collected from examination of program evaluation documentation and individual interviews. While some quantitative data was collected from respondents, such as study abroad location, disciplinary area, and demographic information, the survey items and interview questions were designed to allow for the collection of extensive experiences of students and staff to enable qualitative analysis of the data.

For the data collected from both groups of respondents (students and staff), items were first scanned to locate commentary on areas identified as problematic and suggestions for improvements. As described above, while there was significant positive responses about the MILSA program in the surveys, documents and interviews, this chapter aims to draw attention to the challenges of implementation and maintenance of a mentoring program for study abroad students, and so focusses its analysis on data which highlights these aspects. Following the initial scan of data to isolate responses relating to experienced challenges and suggested changes to the program, this data subset was then re-scanned by both authors (first independently and then in collaboration) to further categorise the data and identify common themes and any outlying responses. This process drew on established data analysis practices for drawing meaning from qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998) and is a method widely used in learning and teaching research and scholarship (Divan et al., 2017).

The methodological issue of response bias (Villar, 2011) is acknowledged; however, as survey participation and responses lacked a tangible reward (for example, students were not receiving academic credit for their responses), the reliability of the data is considered acceptable. Furthermore, as the survey items specifically focussed on collecting data on problems and challenges, there was not an issue with inflated positiveness in responses. The data reported in the sections below are presented as provided by the participants (students and staff), including any inconsistencies in English lexis or syntax.

(4) Results and discussion

As described above, student and staff responses were collated and, through a process of categorisation and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), seven broad areas of challenge emerged from the data: institutional structure of a mentoring program; issues of academic credit; necessary staff expertise; funding; technology issues; scheduling issues and language of instruction. Each of these challenges is discussed in turn in the following sections and illuminated with the staff and student responses.

(4.1) *Institutional structures*

The decision of where a university administratively locates a mentoring program for students from across all faculties is particularly complex. In focus here is the MILSA program which is administrated from a central unit of the university. This has a positive effect as it enables the program to be available to students across the university and contributes to the institution's broader strategic internationalisation aims. As one staff member commented: 'acceptance of the program within the university has been very good,

presumably because the support of developing and deepening intercultural knowledge is part of the university's strategy.'

Location of the program centrally within the university also enables interdisciplinary learning as students participate from across the institution. Centralising also leads to efficiencies in the institution not needing to develop similar program expertise across multiple faculties or departments, and the potential economies of scale can contribute to scalability and sustainability of the program.

(4.2) Academic credit

Despite the benefits of a program run from a central unit rather than from within an academic teaching unit of the university, the responses of the university staff also identified the issues this structure creates for a mentoring program, particularly in relation to students receiving some form of academic credit for completing the program. As students were from disciplinary areas and faculties from across the university, there is not always consistency in how credit is assigned, nor how much additional credit can be accommodated within students' particular degree structure. In the data, staff described this as 'problematic' adding that while they make recommendations that the completion of program warranted the award of two 'ECTS' (the European Credit Transfer System) this was not always possible: 'we recommend that students clarify accreditation with their study counsellors – it seems that there are differences in all departments, needless to say between the faculties. It basically depends on whether study plans contain an option for extra-curricular activities. If they do not, then usually, students do not get any credits.'

This inconsistency can lead to tensions within the student cohort as not all are receiving the same credit for comparable effort. While all students received a certificate of

completion, the inconsistencies in the award of ECTS points was concerning to staff who felt it could send a message to students that the program is not valued and they feared it might result in only students with high levels of intrinsic motivation participating, thereby restricting access to the program for all students.

Student responses also underscored the concerns reported by staff, but related more to students feeling they did not need to invest as much effort into the program, for example: ‘the programme was not binding enough (maybe because we didn’t get any ECTS, I don’t know). Most of the participants didn’t take the task seriously,’ and even more specifically in this student’s comment: ‘it is a pity that there is no possibility to get ECTS points for the program... Even if I think the participation is also very valuable without getting credits for it, one tends to limit the effort put into the project because it ‘doesn’t count’. As a result, some blog contributions and reports remained quite shallow in my opinion.’

(4.3) *Level of staff expertise*

Related to the issue of where a university-wide mentoring program could be institutionally located is the question of the personnel required for its successful delivery. Through this study, the need for extensive administrative support staff was identified. However, an even more challenging human resource issue emerged in relation to the level of expertise required by the staff member undertaking the mentor role. As outlined above by Felten et al. (2013), mentors require specific skills, expertise and experience which go beyond simply imparting information and advice or proposing solutions to students. The MILSA staff, through their experience of successfully delivering the program over several semesters, articulated the complex requirements of the mentor as: ‘responsible for teaching the workshops, giving feedback on student blogs, talking to students on Skype. This person encourages students’ intercultural learning actively and consciously. Ideally, this person has a background in

pedagogy or is an experienced teacher with a theoretical knowledge of intercultural studies.’ This comment highlights the set of facilitation skills needed in the role of a mentor, and specifically points to the need for the mentor to ideally have expertise in the field of intercultural pedagogy. In the case of the MILSA program, the project included a Scientific Director and an advisory board of academic experts in the field of intercultural pedagogy and international education to provide research-driven ideas and support to the mentor.

The level of mentoring skills required by staff, as well as the administrative load of running such a program naturally also raises questions of how a comprehensive mentoring program can be established and maintained to serve the needs across a university. While the costs of infrastructure are relatively low, the human resources required are fundamental to the success of the program, as explained in the comment: ‘running a mentoring program is time-consuming and cannot be done on the side by staff who are already employed. The amount of time that is needed for this cannot be underestimated.’

(4.4) Funding

In view of the complex workload that running a mentoring program demands, procuring specific funding is a necessary requirement to employ the required staff. The MILSA program received an initial external grant to assist with establishment and delivering of the program to a preliminary cohorts of students. This funding was supplemented by the university for the initial period and has been extended since the expiration of the external grant, as an ongoing investment towards achieving the university’s internationalisation strategy. Such commitment from central administration is vital. However, the challenge remains to ensure funding sustainably into the future.

Considering that the MILSA staff have engaged with colleagues across the university, and that the program has been successful with students, makes for a strong case for continuing the program. However, despite these positive factors, the program's sustainability is ultimately linked financially to participant numbers. If students continue to take part in the program, then funding will remain secure. However, should enrolments decline in the future, then funding is not necessarily guaranteed. Such a scenario is likely common across many higher education institutions.

(4.5) Technology

The funding challenges discussed above related to human resourcing requirements. However, financing the set up and ongoing delivery of a mentoring program is also connected to challenges with technology, as reported by both students and staff. Some of these issues are beyond the control of the university, including service problems with communication software used in the during-sojourn mentoring or weak internet connections in a student's particular study abroad location. However, other issues such as the infrastructural challenges staff reported in setting up the website and online support materials as integral components of the mentoring program, could be commonly expected in any large institution with complex systems such as a university. While these technical issues can also be found in more traditional teaching programs delivered onsite at universities, their impacts were perhaps greater given the physical distance between mentors and students or students and their peers, and were perhaps more significant given that students were studying abroad and in interculturally more challenging environments.

(4.6) Scheduling

An additional area of challenge identified in the data related to issues of scheduling and time. A program designed to include communication between mentor and students and between student peers while on study abroad semesters is naturally going to include challenges of dealing in multiple time zones. However, staff reported that different global time zones proved less complicated than they had expected with problems avoided with accurate scheduling of the interviews using Skype or other communication technologies. Beyond issues of global time zones, the greater challenge reported by staff was in implementing and managing the program's complex annual schedule with two program cycles over two semesters and students studying abroad in multiple locations simultaneously.

On a similar organisational level, students grappled with the coordination of the group task. This challenge was also a result of time zone differences but was attributed more to the variations in academic calendar in different study abroad locations. Semesters naturally do not commence and finish within the same week across the world. The following two students' comments in relation to the peer mentoring task highlight the time and scheduling challenges they experienced:

For me, the timing was the worst aspect. As the end of my exchange almost overlapped with the start of the new semester here in MILSA, I was very busy and the same was true for my group members. As a consequence, we couldn't put in as much effort as we would have liked to.

Depending on the diverse destinations and exchange lengths it can be even more difficult to get in touch with each other (as time change, some still have exams, etc.).

In addition, time challenges for students were also related to management of their study load in combination with their participation in the mentoring program. As well as their academic subjects at the host university, as part of the MILSA program students were asked to write blog posts, participate in calls with the mentor, and complete peer mentoring tasks. Balancing this load sometimes led to less than optimum performance, as described by this student: ‘sometimes didn’t have the time to write them carefully, because I had so much to do for my studies. So I didn’t always meet the deadline, otherwise the blogs wouldn’t have been written carefully.’

Accommodating a mentoring program while also balancing the extra-curricular opportunities of a study abroad student was also a challenge reported: ‘I liked least that it was a bit stressful to fulfil all the tasks while abroad. When you are abroad, there are so many new things to do and to experience. You have classes, you have to study for your exams, you want to enjoy your spare time. But it was worth it to participate in the MILSA program.’

(4.7) *Language of instruction*

The final area of challenge identified in the data concerned the use of English as the language of the mentoring program. This was evident in both staff and student comments, for example from a staff member: ‘some students found that writing [took] too much time – since most of them are not native speakers and not students of English, it is possible that their lack of practice in writing, firstly, and secondly writing in English was actually the problem.’ While students’ first language was German, they were studying abroad in English-medium universities in a range of global locations (in Anglophone and non-Anglophone societies). One of their primary goals was the development of their proficiency in English and the research literature (e.g. Benson et al., 2012; Kinginger, 2013; Regan, Howard, and Lemée, 2009) has established the value of study abroad for second language acquisition. Multilingual

skills development is also an element of the university's internationalisation strategy. It was a conscious choice in the program design of the MILSA team to conduct the program in English, even though it was acknowledged that the depth of reflection to be articulated and the complex intercultural topics to be explored would be linguistically challenging for students. This was evidenced in the comments of students, for example: 'it was difficult to experience in German and write them in English' and 'I was stressed because I have problems to express my thoughts / opinions accurately in English.'

(5) Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the challenges posed for a university in implementing and sustaining a comprehensive mentoring program to facilitate students' intercultural awareness and communication skills within the context of a learning abroad experience. The study was grounded in an extensive research evidence base supporting the need for universities to effectively scaffold students to maximise the opportunities afforded by a study abroad semester. As part of a larger evaluation of participants' experience of the effectiveness of the mentoring program, this chapter focussed on the institutional-wide challenges of implementation and sustainability of a mentoring program.

Although this investigation was based on the experiences of a single university and mentoring program, the challenges identified are presumed to be relevant across the higher education sector. The review of research studies (Borghetti and Beaven, 2018; Dervin and Härkönen, 2018; Giovanangeli, Oguro, and Harbon, 2018; Hepple, 2018; Hoult, 2018; Jackson, 2019; Lee, 2018) which examined models for facilitating students' intercultural development through study abroad in the introductory section of this chapter demonstrated how local contexts and diverse learning outcomes generated a wide variety of successful models of practice.

This chapter has gone beyond an analysis of successful program elements to offer professionals in the field of study abroad insights into the less-often acknowledged complexities of implementing and maintaining an intensive mentoring program to maximise the study abroad experiences of students. Through the analysis of the perspectives of key stakeholders of university students and staff, seven areas of challenge were identified under three broad categories:

1. issues of institutional structure, management and resourcing;
2. practical issues in implementation including technical issues and varied time zones;
3. pedagogical considerations, including the choice of the language of instruction and need to balance students' study loads and complex academic calendars.

This diverse range of challenges identified by both staff and students points to the need for institutions to extensively plan for and resource such programs. The findings of the analysis of the experience of the MILSA program also highlight the value of conducting ongoing evaluations with key stakeholders to ensure continuous improvement. Staff at universities with responsibilities for teaching and/or managing study abroad programs may wish to use any or all of the three categories of challenge highlighted through this investigation to take into consideration if developing their own program or to use in evaluation of existing programs. It is hoped that through articulating the multiple challenges, this chapter will assist study abroad administrators and academics keen to maximise students' learning afforded by a study abroad experience, as well as university management keen to contribute to the realisation of institutional strategic goals around internationalisation.

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