

Passports to Education



To offer the most effective international experience for students, schools should start with a program's design, not its destination.

The primary objective for many international programs is to give students a better understanding of business in the context of a particular country or region of the world. But this objective, while laudable, can be far too general as the basis of an effective program. Today, the most effective international programs go beyond the general "Doing Business in Country X" banner. Instead the most successful trips are designed with a particular context, course of study, or theme in mind. Once a theme is selected that suits the school and its students, administrators can choose a destination accordingly.

By Viktoria Kish

For example, if students travel to Germany to study "German business practices," they may end up with a generalized itinerary that fails to provide a focused analysis of the local business environment or key industries. However, in a program that has been based on a particular theme—say, the automotive industry—Germany's strong engineering and

manufacturing sector may be the perfect means to fulfill a set of focused objectives. With that theme in mind, carefully selected company visits can address a range of topics within that sector. A meeting with DaimlerChrysler would highlight cross-cultural issues or merger and acquisition processes; a trip to Volkswagen would offer an opportunity for students to learn about product launches in international markets and executing a “glocal” strategy. Careful placement of these visits within the itinerary ensures that students learn as they go, and can apply their knowledge to the questions they ask or the topics that are addressed in subsequent visits and meetings.

Such an industry-focused approach works well with a group of students with similar interests. But what if the students are from a diverse set of industries, ranging from agribusiness to investment banking? In this case, a program can be flexible, while still remaining goal-oriented. To serve a diverse group of students, a school might define a theme that addresses a current news issue, topical industry sector, or important trend; then it can choose an attractive, academically rich destination that provides the most opportunities to explore that theme in detail.

For example, in the wake of Enron, a business school might choose to take on the knotty problem of corporate governance and transparency in Central and Eastern Europe. Or, following the tech stock crash, students might benefit from a case study of “The Death of the Celtic Tiger” in Ireland. But whether a program targets an industry or chooses a more flexible approach, it should be designed around a course of study in which location is a means to the academic objective, not an end.

Choose the Right Model

Once a theme or industry focus is chosen, the real work of program design begins. Most study programs are based on one of three basic models, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Choosing the model that’s right for a specific school depends on individual policies, resources, and the overall purpose of the international residency or tour.

The managed tour is the most typical model for a study program. Under this model, a study tour combines a variety of company visits, presentations, and panel discussions, each of which addresses a different topic within a chosen theme. A typical day’s activities might include a presentation in the morning and a site visit in the afternoon that complements the morning’s topic. Itineraries can be designed so that the knowledge acquired on “day one” feeds into the topics

under discussion on “day two,” and so on, so that the students are involved in a cumulative learning process. In this way, they end their trip with an in-depth understanding of the program’s theme and major issues.

The advantage of this type of program is that it introduces students to a broad range of political, social, and cultural aspects in the destination country. It provides an ideal forum for discussion on a wide variety of topics, while also being easy to tailor to suit a very specific theme or subject. Students can interact with a range of company representatives—from the largest multinational to local SMEs to individual entrepreneurs—who can address a variety of problems faced by different business entities. This is a time to use the school network, and to find government representatives, journalists, and local faculty who can also provide the background “color” to set the program in context. Such a program is most often designed by participating faculty, which means that they retain control of the academic elements of the program and can build the itinerary based on the needs of their courses.

The managed tour is not without its disadvantages, however. With full teaching and research schedules, faculty may find it difficult and time-consuming to navigate through the minefield of potential disasters, especially if they are not familiar with the destination or haven’t managed such a program before.

In addition, students may see their role in this model as somewhat passive—they may not feel directly involved in how the trip progresses. Consequently, behavioral or disciplinary problems can arise. Yes, even EMBA students fall asleep during company visits, are late to the bus, or come unprepared to ask questions or engage in discussions. It takes vigilance and preparation on the part of faculty to minimize these concerns.

The consultancy project is one of the most popular models for international study. The disadvantages of the managed tour have led many schools to opt for the consultancy project model, which demands more involvement from student participants. Under this model, student teams are matched to a company and given a specific problem within the company to resolve. Problems range from a product launch in a new market to improving communication within an organization. Acting as consultants, students carry out research and meet with relevant employees. They must quickly adjust to company and local cultures and devise viable and practicable solutions.

The advantage of this model is that students gain an immediate and often intimate insight into the ways certain problems have manifested themselves in a company. They also can gain practical experience and a sense of achievement.

Everything they have learned, either in the classroom or in their careers, can be used in a way that helps them realize how much—or how little—they know.

Disadvantages, however, do exist. The consultancy model is difficult to manage effectively. First, a program coordinator or faculty member must find a company willing to take on his or her students. Many companies are reluctant to allow students into their offices to discuss internal problems, no matter how bright, talented, and eager the students are and no matter what their previous experience may be.

Companies may reject a request for a visit, citing issues of confidentiality, accessibility to employees, time constraints, and downright skepticism that the project will achieve anything at all. This intractability can be an immense challenge to many schools, especially smaller ones that may not benefit from large international alumni associations, relationships with multinational companies, or the power of name recognition.

Once the coordinator finds compliant companies willing to participate, he or she should be aware that standards of project work can vary dramatically among companies and student groups. It's also often difficult to assure the quality of the educational experience from year to year. Furthermore, poor

student performance on a project can jeopardize a school's relationship with a company. In one instance, when a student team presented inferior consultancy work based largely on assumption and speculation during one school's consultancy trip, it almost cost the employee who had agreed to host the visit his job. The incident did not reflect well on either the host or the school.

Whether this model will work depends a great deal on a school's internal and external resources, as well as the strength of its corporate relationships. It's also important to ensure that the project allows students to develop their cross-cultural communication skills as well as their understanding of business issues—that is, their desire to “solve” a company's problem should not overshadow their primary goal of learning to manage business problems outside the context of their own country or culture. Making project and attendance requirements clear up front, however, can help focus students on their learning objectives, secure their participation and interest in the project, and ensure they give their best efforts.

The business plan model combines in-classroom teaching and onsite visits. Students are required to immediately apply what

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REPORT

A World Outside the Classroom

Daniel Renton

Home School: University of Western Australia
Crawley, Australia

Host School: Copenhagen Business School
Copenhagen, Denmark

Daniel Renton, a native of Perth, Australia, sees his experience at the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark as a must-add to his MBA degree. His MBA education at the University of Western Australia's Graduate School of Management was valuable, he says, but today's climate demands more than a local education.

“The value of MBAs is being slowly eroded as more and more universities offer them,” says Renton. “While my home university has one of the best MBA programs in Australia, I decided

that an international study experience would add value to my MBA and keep me competitive in the job market.”

Renton says he was attracted to

Denmark not only because of his interactions with CBS exchange students studying in Australia, but also because of Denmark's reputation for socially and environmentally responsible business practices. The widespread use of English among the citizens was also a selling point, he says, because he knew that communication would not be a problem.

Renton is participating in CBS's “Internship/Mini-Consultancy on Innovation and Business Development,” a 15-week course that involves three

weeks of full-time seminars and case-work and up to 12 weeks of hands-on work with a Danish company. Renton works for a small, startup company in Copenhagen, where he says he is getting a firsthand look at the struggles of a company just getting on its feet.

This opportunity to work with people from across the globe has been eye-opening, says Renton, through both his formal coursework and internship and his informal interactions with different people.

“A good friend of mine once said, ‘Never let school get in the way of your education,’” says Renton. “Studying abroad is very much about learning outside the classroom.”



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they learn to the creation of a business plan. Prior to leaving for their destination, students are divided into teams. Each team is assigned a product or brand to launch in a destination market. Ideally, the product or brand is something that does not yet exist in-country—a Starbucks coffee shop in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, or a Barnes & Noble bookstore in Taiwan.

Under this model, a program coordinator or faculty member schedules company visits, panel discussions, and presentations aimed at providing students with critical data on the country and its investment climate. Meetings with local Chambers of Commerce or government agencies can be especially helpful. Student teams also are encouraged to set up visits with companies to give them even more insight into how to enter the market, how to work within the competitive environment, and how to navigate the red tape.

Upon returning to their home campus, teams present their business plans to a committee drawn from several sources, such as the alumni association, faculty, board of trustees, and school benefactors, as well as a representative from the destination country's commercial section. These individuals judge the plans and award a prize for the best business plan.

The business plan model motivates students to learn and apply their knowledge in a practical way. It combines classroom learning with practical research and demands that students use all areas of their business knowledge as well as their presentation and analytical skills. In addition, the success of the program is highly reliant on the students themselves, rather than on a host company, giving them a greater sense of ownership of the program than either of the other two models. Additionally, with adjustments, the project can work just as effectively for EMBA and MBA students as it can for undergraduates who have completed their core subjects.

Disadvantages are few and center mainly on time constraints. Students may feel they do not have enough time onsite to complete such an ambitious scheme. They also may find that they have scheduling conflicts between key visits and cultural events in the destination country and their own project schedules.

Strike the Right Balance

Whether the trip is a mandatory international residency or an international business elective, it must appeal both to students and faculty if it is going to succeed. The trip should

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REPORT

Far from Home

Jennifer Twehues

Home School: International School of Management
Dortmund, Germany

Host School: University of Stellenbosch Business School
Bellville, Republic of South Africa

When she chose an MBA program, Jennifer Twehues considered attending a school in Europe, near her native Germany. But she decided that didn't offer the change in perspective she was seeking. "South Africa sounded more like an adventure," she says. "Although I've traveled the world extensively, I had never before touched South African ground."

It has been a struggle traveling so far from home, Twehues concedes. Her

social network was far away and she sometimes felt like quitting the program. In addition, getting used to the very traditional and sometimes rigid aspects of Afrikaans culture was a challenge to her European point of view. But in retrospect, that is the point of international study, she says, and she is pleased that she made it through the program. "It makes me proud that I won this 'inner battle,'" says Twehues.

Nevertheless, she would like to see that "inner battle" lessened for exchange students in the future, no matter where they travel, she added. "I would like to see more assistance in personal development within the program. Mentorships or regular personal assessments might

create much more self-mastered graduates," she says.

Through her experience, Twehues also saw how a country tackles its own history, dealing with problems that she had not been exposed to before, such as black empowerment, employment equity, and economic restructuring. "It's a range of concerns that my home country does not face," she says. "Studying in this emerging country probably gave me the biggest and most comprehensive business picture I could possibly have achieved in just one year. I gained unique insights into how an economy finds its way into the first world."



strike a balance between work and free time. All participants should be exposed to a variety of companies and situations, but also should be able and encouraged to learn and explore on their own.

Unfortunately, such exploration is attended by some risk. Ten years ago, an international program director worried about accidents and illness, lost visas, petty crime, and missed flights. Today, the world is much different and presents a different level of risk. Recent terrorist activities have prompted schools to reassess their objectives. More than ever, schools find they must also strike a balance between their students' educational needs and new security measures.

Central and Eastern Europe, England, France, Germany, Ireland, and Mexico are especially popular destinations for students traveling abroad today while globalization and the demand for more unusual destinations have also led schools to establish programs in newly emerging markets such as China and Russia. The environments in some of these countries are more unstable than others, but all carry a level of risk. Therefore, it's always prudent to keep an eye on U.S. State Department warnings, ensure that students are adequately insured, and discuss implementing appropriate

contingency plans and procedures should anything unexpected occur.

Raising the Stakes

With more schools seeking international status, the stakes in international management education have never been higher. At the same time, recessionary woes and greater competition among schools are pressuring business schools to find new and innovative ways to restructure and improve the international opportunities they have to offer.

In such a competitive climate, business schools often turn international trips and residencies into a curricular focal point, making their design all the more important. A well-designed program should not be based simply on a destination, but on the approach and themes that best suit a school's students, mission, and resources. Once those details are in place, a school can take full advantage of what international study has to offer, both to its students and its global reputation. **Z**

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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REPORT

A Key to Success

Will Stewart

Home School: University of South Carolina at Aiken

Host Country: Prague, Czech Republic

As an undergraduate at USCA, Will Stewart participated in its business department's annual three-week study abroad program in Prague three years running, visiting multinational companies such as Skoda-Volkswagen, Bohemia Glassworks, HP, and Philip Morris. A travel enthusiast, Stewart also has ventured to Ireland, Italy, England, Austria, France, and other countries.

From visit to visit over the past three years, Stewart has been able to observe the transformation of the Eastern European economy from socialism to capitalism. "Seeing this transformation

in progress gives a student from the United States a new perspective on capitalism and the United States' position in the world economy," he

explains. "I have been able to observe the region's transformation from an economy driven by command to an economy driven by supply and demand."

Stewart also points to the expansion of his U.S.-centered perspective as an important part of his international education. "One's ethnocentrism becomes painfully obvious when trying to analyze a different culture objectively," he notes. "For me, the most challenging part of the study abroad experience is to refrain from projecting American beliefs, values, and norms onto another society."



He also appreciated the fact that the trip's sponsor, Professor David Harrison, arranges cultural elements as well, such as introducing students to Verdi's opera *La Traviata*.

Stewart is now a senior at USCA, majoring in management. He hopes to earn an MBA in international business and eventually secure a position at the U.S. embassy in Prague. Stewart strongly believes that international study is valuable for anyone, but is a necessity for business students. "USCA has a great study abroad program for undergraduates. If I could change one aspect of the program, however, I would make studying abroad a mandatory requirement to receive a degree in business administration," Stewart comments. "Despite the cost and logistical problems, studying business in a foreign country is a necessity to being successful in today's global marketplace."