

Assessing Assessment: Important New Research in Education Abroad

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Reviewed by: Emily Gorlewski, Western Illinois University

Why should students study abroad? In an attempt to find the answer to this question, an increasing number of researchers have taken on the challenge of examining the effects of study abroad on students, or, in more popular parlance, outcomes assessment. The projects in this recent wave of research have ranged from a study of participants during one semester (McKeown 2009) to a ten-year, six-phase project on students in an entire state university system (Sutton and Rubin 2010). The different outcomes measured in these projects underscore the multiple purposes of international education. When college students "go mobile," are they hoping to gain intercultural competence? Cognitive development? Social consciousness? Are our students' goals different from our goals for them? From our institutions' goals?

I contend that there is not one universal, fundamental, unassailable purpose for education abroad. The mission of your study abroad programs should be an extension of the mission of your institution, and the goals of your office, departments, faculty leaders, and the students themselves. Consequently, there are and will continue to be many different methods and variables involved in studying the outcomes of study abroad programs. Each research project reviewed here is a vital addition to our understanding of outcomes assessment and will drive future study and practice.

Research Questions and Variables

Four recent studies illustrate the range of different approaches to outcomes assessment. The SAGE project (Paige, et al. 2009), investigates whether students became more globally engaged—that is, whether they gained in civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, voluntary simplicity, and social entrepreneurship after participating in study abroad. In *The First-Time Effect*, McKeown (2009) explores whether there is a correlation between study abroad and gains in cognitive development. Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill's (2009) combination of intercultural theory and student development theory—the Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI)—

includes items in three domains of global learning and development: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Sutton and Rubin (2010), in the GLOSSARI project, study many different outcomes, including cognitive learning and the effect of study abroad on academic indicators such as retention, as well as “core liberal arts aspirations” such as critical thinking. They also explore whether certain program characteristics were more likely to produce positive outcomes, and whether students with certain characteristics were more likely to study abroad. The GLOSSARI project also includes a phase comparing different instruments for outcomes assessment and a phase comparing student learning in the same course taught on campus and abroad.

McKeown’s (2009) narrow focus on the variable of previous international travel and the cognitive domain is interesting among the other, more ambitious studies. The “First Time Effect” he describes is that students who had not previously traveled internationally were the only ones in his study who showed positive cognitive-learning outcomes. In order to measure gains in development, he used a pre- and post-test method with a scored essay instrument called the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID), first developed in 1974 by Knefelkamp and Widick. He did study other variables, such as gender, language of the host country, where students studied and lived, degree of cultural immersion, and activities while on the program, but none of them correlated to any cognitive gain. They may have correlated to gains in intercultural understanding or global-mindedness, had he chosen to study those outcomes, but McKeown deliberately chose to focus just on cognitive outcomes. This makes his study important because it is so different from past and present research. McKeown contends that, with this different and narrower focus, a researcher can study the outcomes of more diverse programs.

Findings and Limitations

Some of the findings of the GLOSSARI project (Sutton and Rubin 2010) have been widely reported. Among the more newsworthy findings are that students who study abroad are more likely to graduate within four years, but not within six years, than students who do not; and that studying abroad can improve students’ GPAs more than staying at home. These results are exciting given the scope and rigor of the project, and the fact that the researchers tried, using an impressively complicated sampling process, to control for factors such as self-selection bias (i.e., the same characteristics within a student that cause him/her to study abroad may also cause him/her to graduate within four years). It will be interesting to read the articles that are currently in the works on this project, and see what further research emerges using the datasets and the Intercultural Learning Outcomes (ILO) instrument, a self-report survey based on the work of A.F. Fantini that was developed as part of it.

Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009) and Paige et al. (2009) found positive outcomes of study abroad. Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill showed gains in some of the dimensions studied, but not others. For example, in the cognitive domain, they found that students gained in knowledge, but not in knowing, “what they learned rather than how they think” (112). Paige et al. found that study abroad alumni reported that their education abroad experiences influenced their global engagement as measured across five domains: civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, voluntary simplicity, and social entrepreneurship. They reported that study abroad also influenced their career and education choices.

Both the Braskamp, Braskamp and Merrill (2009) and Paige et al. (2009) studies used methodologies that rely on self-reporting of knowledge or influence. This may be a limitation, partly because someone who has studied abroad could be especially likely to answer positively to

questions regarding outcomes. However, one of the phases of the GLOSSARI project (Sutton and Rubin 2010) compared an instrument that measured self-reported knowledge to one that measured demonstrated knowledge and found them to be quite consistent.

McKeown (2009) examined only students who studied abroad and none who did not participate. It should be expected that any student who attends college for a semester would have some gain in intellectual development. However, the instrument he used, the MID, has been used in other research on college students, so this may have been the reason he chose this design.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

Program design will continue to be an important part of fostering student learning on study abroad programs. It cannot be assumed that the different desired outcomes of study abroad will take place automatically. Rather, those who are responsible for planning and designing study abroad experiences can use these research studies to identify areas in which current study abroad programs are not fulfilling these objectives, and attempt to design programs deliberately to lead to these outcomes. The GLOSSARI project (Sutton and Rubin 2010) includes research on program characteristics that are favorable for outcomes such as graduation rate and GPA, and Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009) present a model for designing programs that promote global learning and development.

When certain outcomes have been established as desirable for a particular institution, office or program, and planned for instructionally and experientially, practitioners can assess whether they actually occur. Learning outcomes research on programs deliberately designed for certain purposes could be a welcome addition to the field and could steer improvement in the design and delivery of these programs.

I also see a need for more focused studies such as McKeown's (2009). Large-scale projects like SAGE, GLOSSARI, and some others that have been completed or are currently underway have been invaluable in helping to shed light on some of the different methodologies and variables in outcomes assessment. Now, doctoral candidates, practitioners, and other researchers will have the background necessary to understand which variables could use more focus.

These four research projects show the enormous depth and breadth of emerging research on study abroad outcomes. This research will only become broader and deeper as the field matures; the challenge will be focusing on what is really important to you, your institution, and your students.