

**Study abroad for students from families without experience of international education:
concerns and resilience**

Abstract

This chapter investigates the concerns and strategies of study abroad students whose families have not had experience of international education. Focussing on first-generation students, a cohort underrepresented in the research literature, this study undertook extensive individual interviews with 31 undergraduate students to generate a qualitative data set identifying students' key concerns about costs, culture and language issues in their study abroad program. Significantly, the study also revealed the students' substantial resourcefulness and resilience in responding to their concerns. These findings highlight the need to avoid positioning first generation study abroad students in terms of what they might lack in their family backgrounds and to acknowledge their resourcefulness in dealing with inevitable challenges in the programs they undertake. The chapter also addresses the ongoing need for universities to understand diverse student backgrounds, in order to provide appropriate support and information to demystify the experience of studying abroad for all students.

Keywords

first generation students; Study Abroad; resilience; international education; mobility

Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of study abroad students who are the first member of their family to undertake an international education program. While there is wide-ranging research into the situation of students who are the first member of their

family to attend university (often referred to as “first generation”), less has been investigated about whether being from a family without previous experience of studying internationally (hereafter referred to as “first generation study abroad”) poses any specific challenges to students undertaking a study abroad program.

Understanding diverse student experiences is important if universities seek to maximise study abroad participation by all students, irrespective of family experience of international education. The multiple benefits of study abroad include greater overall retention and success at university (Richard et al., 2017); students’ development of intercultural understandings (Jackson & Oguro, 2018); and enhanced rates of employment on graduation (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017; Potts, 2015) so it is important that all students are supported to access the opportunities. To expand participation in study abroad, the concerns and experiences of diverse student groups, including first generation students, need to be understood. This chapter addresses this through a qualitative study of the experiences of 31 students at a comprehensive university in Australia enrolled in a degree program incorporating a one-year study abroad program. The students were the first in their families to undertake an international education program and their collected experiences can expand understandings in the higher education sector of this particular group of students.

Literature Review

Over the past two decades there has been consistent worldwide growth in the numbers of students studying internationally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019). While research into the profile of students undertaking study abroad has indicated generally lower participation rates from first generation students (Brux & Fry, 2010; Martinez et al., 2009; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Stroud, 2010; Sweeney, 2013),

there is some evidence of growing diversity among study abroad cohorts (Institute for International Education, 2019). It can be difficult to isolate research findings on first generation students' university experience as they are often connected with issues of class or equity categories of disadvantage, which makes it hard to distinguish conclusions (Martinez et al., 2009; O'Shea et al., 2018). However, given the efforts to widen participation across the higher education sector, it is important to acknowledge the experience of first generation students so that educators can better "see" these students (Garrison & Gardner, 2012, p. 49). Generally, first generation students have tended to be portrayed negatively in the research literature as shown by Spiegler and Bednarek's (2013) review of 70 studies which positioned first generation students as "at risk" (p. 329) and having difficulties in the university environment. However, more recently, this deficit positioning is also being challenged in the literature (Devlin, 2013; Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Greenwald, 2012; O'Shea, 2019), and will be examined further here in this research into the experiences of a cohort of first generation study abroad students.

Research into students' concerns about a study abroad experience has identified a diverse and intertwined set of issues with multiple possible sources. One common and significant concern is the cost of study abroad, identified in studies across a range of contexts (Finn & Darmody, 2017; Harvey et al., 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009; Whatley, 2017). Further student concerns identified in the research literature include engaging with other cultures (Brux & Fry, 2010; Jones et al., 2016; Sweeney, 2013); maintaining ties to family and home community (Beerrens et al., 2016; Finn & Darmody, 2017; Van Mol & Timmermann, 2014); safety (Brux & Fry, 2010); academic programs issues (Beerrens et al., 2016; Brux & Fry, 2010); and engaging in a foreign language community (Beerrens et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2016; Lörz et al., 2015). This extensive collection of concerns identified

in the research literature relates to study abroad students in general, but informs the study reported in this chapter focusing on the experience of first generation students in particular.

The theoretical literature informing this study includes Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital theory, commonly used in educational research to interpret how students' economic, social and cultural capital impacts on their educational experience. These "capitals" also provide a useful lens to examine students' concerns around study abroad identified in the empirical literature outlined above, namely concerns about finances, family, culture and language. Students' economic capital (income, wealth, assets, financial security) can be seen to enable them to address the costs of participation in study abroad, while their social capital (networks, social groups, relationships) offers them transgenerational knowledge and information (Ball et al., 2002; Lareau, 2000) to allay their concerns. Cultural capital (skills, tastes, knowledge and self-image) encompasses aspects such as familiarity with international travel, previous cross-cultural experiences and the confidence and aspiration to participate in study abroad. Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) "mobility capital" applied the notion of capital to the international education context and adds to the theoretical framework of this study. She identified students' family and personal histories; previous mobility experience (including language competence); adaptation to other cultures; and personality features as the four key elements of mobility capital.

Research Design

This research study involved students enrolled at a large urban Australian university in an undergraduate degree course which includes a compulsory year (two semesters) of study abroad. The aim of the research was to investigate any particular concerns first generation study abroad students might have and how they respond to these challenges. The study

collected a qualitative data set of recounted student experiences using semi-structured individual interviews with 31 first generation study abroad students. Although the inclusion of a qualitative, narrative research method is complex and time-consuming, it was considered necessary as students' personal histories, cultural traditions, aspirations and experiences impact on them "in ways that are neither uniform nor predictable" (Rizvi, 2005, p. 81).

To collect a broad spectrum of student experience, the study collected data from students at multiple stages of the degree program. The particular undergraduate course is a double degree program requiring five years (ten semesters) of study. However, in the fourth year of the program, students study abroad at one of the university's partner institutions in thirteen countries worldwide. This study included students in years 1-3 preparing for their future study abroad year, as well as from students in their fifth year who had recently returned from their year abroad. Year 4 students were excluded as they were away at the time on study abroad. Including this range of students addresses Dall'Alba and Sidhu's (2015) argument that most previous research has focused on students intending to study abroad rather than those who have actually participated. However, it should be noted while data was collected from students across different year groups to consider a range of experiences, the research reported here was not seeking to compare these students to each other.

The study was approved by the university's Ethics Committee and students' participation was voluntary. Students were recruited via a call distributed to the full cohort of 1247 students enrolled in the degree program seeking first generation study abroad students willing to participate. Of the 31 students who volunteered and were interviewed,

twenty were preparing for a future study abroad year and eleven had returned from their study abroad in the previous year. Table 1 provides an overview of the numbers of student participants and their study abroad locations.

Table 1

Study Abroad Locations and Numbers of Students

Study abroad locations	Number of students
Germany	6
France	4
Switzerland	4
China	3
Japan	3
Chile	2
Argentina	2
Colombia	1
Costa Rica	1
Italy	1
Latino-USA	1
Mexico	1
Québec, Canada	1
Spain	1

The locations outlined in Table 1 are generally representative of typical patterns of study abroad location choice across the program, namely that European locations are most commonly chosen, followed by locations in Asia and then in the Americas. The single student from Spain is unrepresentative.

The interviews with students were semi-structured, conducted individually and digitally recorded, with an average duration of 35 minutes. Students were questioned about their backgrounds, concerns about studying abroad and, in the case of the fifth-year students returned from a year abroad, their experiences overseas. Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the interview data extracted common themes and significant trends. In addition to these

inductive themes, a priori themes identified from issues and theories in the academic literature (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) also informed the analysis. Repetition of issues across multiple interviews was an important method for theme identification, as well as actively exploring points of difference. In the reporting of student responses below, pseudonyms, year of study and their study abroad country are noted.

Findings

The thematic analysis yielded three key areas of concerns raised by the students which were categorised as financial, cultural and language. The following section outlines these concerns and the students' responses to them, illustrated by their recounts.

Financial concerns

As noted in the literature review, numerous studies have identified the expense of study abroad as a significant concern for all students. Our interview data confirmed this and unsurprisingly that costs became increasingly of concern as students' date of departure approached. While students in the year directly before study abroad had more definite strategies in place to fund their trip, students from all years reported they were personally contributing towards the costs, had a specific savings plan and many were working several jobs in the years leading up to the study abroad period. Some also reported relying on financial support from parents for at least some of the cost. Overall, a sense of confidence was evident in the responses, exemplified in one student's comment that she had "*planned it out*" by having a permanent part-time job and planning to work while she was abroad (Sophie, Third Year, France). However, maintaining paid positions while concurrently studying full-time in the semesters leading to the study abroad year also proved challenging for some students. One spoke about her own and her parents' concerns: "*They think I've*

been working a bit too much, I didn't do my best in uni last semester but I have to save this certain amount to be safe when I go overseas" (Mariana, Second Year, France).

The students widely reported accessing the financial support available from the university or through government loans, which addressed a proportion of the cost. Additional strategies reported were the plans some students had to work part-time while abroad, however, this option was not consistently available as rights to work differed across the study abroad countries. Being mindful of cost of living when choosing a study abroad location was also a strategy reported by some students such as Maxine (Fifth Year, Chile), who had returned from her year abroad and reported her success in managing the costs through careful budgeting and strategic choice of a relatively inexpensive study abroad destination.

Cultural concerns

Culture was expected to emerge as a concern as the research literature highlighted how students' perceptions of their abilities to navigate other cultures impact on study abroad participation. For students preparing for their year abroad, Winnie's comment that *"I will have to embrace the culture, adapt"* (Third Year, France) captured the awareness students had that cultural issues are inevitable and will need to be addressed as part of a study abroad experience. Most fifth-returned year students relayed their experiences of initial culture shock, the challenges they had in negotiating life in a new country, but the overall success they experienced looking back on their year abroad.

However, many of the returned students also reported feeling challenged by cultural values they had encountered in their host society which they found unacceptable, with the term *"stressful"* often occurring in their accounts. In particular, racism was a theme raised

by many students across all years, with some third-year students concerned by the possibility of encountering racist attitudes while abroad, and some fifth-year students reporting the racism they had personally encountered or observed.

Language concerns

As all the study abroad location options for the students in this program are in non-Anglophone societies where the students need to communicate in a second language, it is unsurprising that all students raised concerns about language. The experiences of the fifth-year students who had returned from a year abroad provided examples of specific challenges when studying and living in a non-Anglophone social context. Each had at least two years (four semesters) of language studies completed prior to departure which prepared them to an extent. However they still reported significant challenges, as illustrated by the experience of Diana (Fifth Year, Colombia): *“I had quite good academic Spanish, but when we first got to Colombia it was really confronting how fast people spoke, the slang they used, the accent and everything...so I think that was a bit bewildering at first”*. Most of the fifth year students also described the shock they initially felt on arrival: *“I found it daunting when I got there, it was intense”* (Leo, Fifth Year, China) and feeling unprepared for the academic requirements: *“I was in no way equipped to handle studying in another language”* (Tiana, Fifth Year, Italy). However, as in the case of the cultural concerns identified, students’ overall evaluation when anticipating their future study abroad year or having completed the year, was that language challenges were unavoidable but could be navigated.

Resilience

The findings presented above cover the key concerns raised by the first generation study abroad students concerning cost, culture and language. However, the process of thematic analysis of the participants' responses also identified a general disposition towards rising to the inevitable challenges of study abroad and a demonstration of resilience. While the Year 1-3 students expressed apprehension about the challenges ahead, a general sense of confidence to deal with any issues that arose was also evident. For example, one student who reported having never travelled internationally before defiantly stated: *"I'm not going to spend the whole year moping and feeling negative"* (Chloe, Third Year, Japan). This positivity was common and exemplified in other students' comments such as Scarlett (Second Year, Argentina) that even though she had many questions and concerns, she would *"just figure it out"* or Justine (Second Year, Germany) that while she felt daunted, she was also *"...up for the challenge."*

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the key concerns experienced by a group first generation study abroad students, a cohort largely underrepresented in the research literature. Although the study comprised a relatively small sample size, the rich qualitative data set collected through extensive interviews has allowed for the collation of the experiences of students leading up to study abroad and also of students who have completed their year abroad.

The overriding concern of all the first generation study abroad students related to the cost of the experience. While this confirms findings in previous studies of study abroad students more broadly, the strategies identified through the study that the first generation students used to manage the financial issues were wide-ranging. They were highly

motivated and committed to their course of study and showed resilience in financing their study abroad experience through extensive forward planning and careful savings plans.

The first generation study abroad students all described how they were accessing and benefitting from the funding initiatives in the sector (including university and government grants or loans) and these appeared successful in addressing the cost of study abroad as an upfront barrier to participation among the students enrolled. This evidence does not however address other students whose knowledge of such grants or loans is limited and therefore do not consider even enrolling in a degree course which includes a study abroad program.

While some of the first generation students in the study were able to receive financial support from their family, the majority were personally contributing significantly towards the costs of their study abroad. Many described working several jobs alongside their studies. Given that the study abroad period was their fourth year of study, they had a long period to accumulate funds, a curriculum factor which may be of particular benefit to first generation students. In addition, the availability of study abroad locations with lower costs of living also benefitted some of the first generation students who made strategic choices to reduce pressure on their finances.

The other key concerns identified by students in the study related to culture and language issues and also reflect findings in the literature on broader cohorts of study abroad students. Concerns about racism in particular have been identified (eg: Brux & Fry, 2010) which can constrain participation in study abroad by students who belong to racial, ethnic or ethno-religious groups which are a minority in the host society. The fears expressed by some of the first generation students in this study that they may experience racism and discrimination while on study abroad is a timely reminder of the need for universities to

acknowledge the issue for all students and to provide support, for example by drawing on the resources offered by organisations such as Diversity Abroad (2020).

The widespread language concerns expressed by the first generation study abroad students in this study highlights a reticence identified in previous research (Netz, 2015; Van Mol & Timmermann, 2014) that students who feel their foreign language skills are inadequate might lack the confidence for study abroad. For this cohort, while their degree program included four semesters of language study prior to the study abroad period, their responses showed this was still inadequate for the situations they needed to navigate at university and in their host society. The experiences of the first generation students who successfully completed a year of studying and living in a non-Anglophone environment highlight their resilience to persevere in a challenging linguistic environment. These findings confirm the research into the experience of students who are first in their families to attend university, that they are highly capable when given opportunities to participate and the support required to succeed (Devlin et al., 2012).

There is a degree of complexity and uncertainty in undertaking study abroad, and the ability to deal with this is an essential aspect of the resilience and success of this group of first generation study abroad students. Rather than interpreting their lack of prior family experience as problematic, the students' experiences collected in this study indicate that many have incredible resilience, a spirit of adventure, resourcefulness and a strong desire to push their personal limits. Students variously expressed their love of travel, interest in learning about other cultures, determination to succeed in their language studies, desire for independence, and positive mindset to overcome any difficulties that might arise during their study abroad year. Their dispositions strongly align with Murphy-Lejeune's (2002)

description of the key characteristics of “travelling personalities” (p. 67), including curiosity, openness to others, autonomy, language competence, the urge to travel, and the capacity to easily move and adapt to new environments (Murphy-Lejeune 2002).

As has been argued in the research literature from a range of contexts (eg: Devlin, 2013; Garrison & Gardner, 2012; O'Shea et al., 2016), there is a need to avoid positioning all first generation university students only in terms of what they might lack in their family backgrounds. Instead, we need to understand their resourcefulness in dealing with inevitable challenges in the program of study they have chosen. Universities should therefore prioritise their efforts on removing the structural and institutional barriers that may limit the ability of first generation study abroad students to access, participate and succeed in study abroad.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has explored first generation study abroad student experiences of participating in a study abroad program, to investigate the concerns these students face and their response to these challenges. The findings of this research indicate that first generation study abroad respondents were concerned primarily about financial issues, potential cultural issues and language proficiency issues relating to their study abroad. However, they demonstrated significant resourcefulness in implementing strategies to address areas of concern that might otherwise have posed a barrier to their participation or successful completion. In particular, they implemented an array of strategies to address the financial costs associated with their study abroad program, and demonstrated resilience in dealing with the issues they actually encountered while on study abroad.

The resourcefulness and resilience of this particular group of students notwithstanding, this research points to the clear need at an institutional level to acknowledge the diversity of student backgrounds, and to continue to work to minimise the barriers and address the concerns that might prevent all students from participating in study abroad. This is particularly important to ensure that the benefits of international programs are available on an equitable basis to all students. Our findings indicate that first generation study abroad students enrolled in courses with a study abroad component are largely aware of and are accessing the financial and other institutional supports available to them. However, further research is needed to identify the concerns and barriers for first generation study abroad students who do not enrol in such programs to understand their particular circumstances. Through a better understanding of student experiences of study abroad, particularly those of first generation study abroad students, higher education institutions can provide the appropriate support and information to demystify the experience of studying abroad for all students, enabling them to participate in greater numbers and with greater ease.

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