

**THE DECISION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY ABROAD
PROGRAMMES: THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDINAL FACTORS
AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

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ABSTRACT

The increasing trend for the globalization of business has highlighted the need for a better understanding of the factors that influence levels of intercultural awareness within organizations. Within the higher education sector, one initiative that aims to address this issue is the tertiary student exchange program. This paper reports on a study that investigates factors that influence students' propensity to engage in these programs. It identified certain personality and cultural background characteristics that are associated with such a propensity. The implications of this for education in the business and international management field are discussed.

Keywords: *management education; exchange programs; intercultural awareness.*

INTRODUCTION

Increasing workforce diversity and the globalization of business have given rise to a need for a new breed of employee in organizations, particularly multinational organizations (Caligiuri, Jacobs and Farr, 2000). Today's organizations need people who are open to diversity and adaptable to change, and who thrive in uncertain complex situations. Studies have highlighted the relationship between the level of understanding within organizations of the values of different cultures and successful business outcomes (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). Related studies have highlighted the fluidity of attitude and value systems of managers and employees (see for instance, the work by Langan (1999), McKay, (1993) and Chippendale (2000) on the shift in value preferences of Australian managers and employees in the 1990's).

Tertiary educational institutions can play a key part in developing this new breed of employee by offering courses that encourage global thinking and receptiveness to diverse values/beliefs (Webb, Mayer, Pioche and Allen, 2000; Gray, Murdock and Stebbins, 2002). Study programs abroad, where students complete part of their studies in a tertiary institution outside of the student's home institution, should form a fundamental part of these course offerings. Encouraging students to undertake part of their study abroad is likely to not only enhance a student's employability but also assist in developing important life skills. According to a major report examining the extent and value of Australian students' international study experience, the researchers concluded that despite the benefits of overseas study experience, Australian students have not embraced study abroad programs with enthusiasm (Davis, Milne and Olsen, 1999). Although cost was mentioned, a culture that does not

value international study experiences was seen to be the main obstacles to Australian students studying overseas.

The current study attempts to identify some of the factors that may be associated with students' participation in tertiary student exchange programs, by investigating some of the reasons that may explain the absence of a strong culture that values international study experiences. Against this background, we note that previous studies attempting to explain the participation of students in study abroad programs have not considered the differences in personality dimensions of students who do participate, and those who do not. We argue that students who have personalities characterized by receptivity to diversity and change are more likely to participate in an exchange program compared to students who do not participate. The study also considers students' immersion in 'things foreign', such as mixing with foreign friends, studying foreign languages and the nationality of the students and their parents. We suggest that the deeper the students' immersion in foreign matters the more likely the student will participate in an exchange program.

HYPOTHESES

Very few studies have considered the association between participation in exchange programs and a student's personality. Personality refers to the consistent characteristics (or traits) within an individual that affect the way they interact with others and the situations they encounter (Cerver and Schneider, 1988). Two personality characteristics included in this study are Openness and Tolerance of Ambiguity. Both these characteristics were considered important because they have been related to ethnocentrism (Furnham and Ribchester, 1995; Caligiuri et al., 2000), cross-cultural adjustment (Black, 1990) and dogmatism/rigidity (MacDonald, 1970), among many other correlates. Students' receptivity to study abroad programs may therefore be related to the two personality characteristics, Openness and Tolerance of Ambiguity.

Openness comprises one of the 'big five' personality traits and captures the extent to which an individual is original, open to a wide variety of stimuli, has broad interests and is willing to take risks

as opposed to being narrow-minded and cautious (George and Jones, 1996). As suggested by Caligiuri et al. (2000), individuals who rate high on Openness are more likely to work effectively in cross-cultural situations, to collaborate well with a diversity of colleagues, and to acculturate to foreign countries. Thus, tertiary students high on Openness are likely to be receptive to study abroad programs offered by their institutions.

H1: Openness will be related to students' participation in a tertiary exchange program.

Intolerance of Ambiguity may be defined as "the tendency to perceive (i.e. interpret) ambiguous situations as sources of threat; tolerance of ambiguity as the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable" (Budner, 1962). An ambiguous situation may be defined as one that cannot be adequately structured or categorized by the individual. Intolerance of Ambiguity has been related to a number of variables, such as dogmatism, rigidity, ethnocentrism, conformity, and impulsive closure of decisions (Budner, 1962; MacDonald, 1970; Norton, 1975; Furnham, 1994; Furnham and Ribchester, 1995). On the basis of existing research, it is likely that a student's decision to participate in an exchange program will be related to the student's Tolerance of Ambiguity. High Tolerance students are likely to be receptive to tertiary exchange program because the program would be viewed as exciting, energizing and, overall, a positive experience. Low Tolerance students are less likely to be receptive to such programs because the situation (studying abroad in a foreign country) may be perceived as unfamiliar, novel, unstructured and therefore threatening.

H2: Tolerance of Ambiguity will be related to a student's participation in a tertiary exchange program.

Aside from measuring the personality variables, openness and tolerance for ambiguity, Caligiuri et al., (2000) also suggests that behavioural measures could also be included to examine the connection between actions and beliefs. Thus, students who show an interest in foreign and diverse experiences are more likely to be receptive to study abroad programs.

Examples of foreign/diverse experiences could include eating at 'ethnic' restaurants, watching foreign films, having a diverse group of friends, extensive overseas travel and an interest in foreign languages. Such behaviours tend to indicate that students have an interest in and feel at ease with, cultural diversity. The following three hypotheses focus on the likely relationship between participation in student exchange programs and the extent to which students engage in diverse experiences or situations.

H3: The ability to speak a foreign language will be related to students' participation in a tertiary exchange program.

H4: Years of foreign language study will be related to students' participation in a tertiary exchange program.

H5: Prior overseas travel experience will be related to students' participation in a tertiary exchange program.

The final three hypotheses consider the possible relationship between participation in an exchange program and three biographical variables: age, nationality and the presence of overseas-born parents.

H6: Students' age will be related to participation in a tertiary exchange program

H7: Having foreign parents will be related to students' participation in a tertiary exchange program.

H8: Students' cultural background will be related to participation in a tertiary exchange program.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sample and procedures

Data were collected by means of a survey questionnaire. The respondents were second/third year students completing a degree in International Trade at a large government university in Australia. Two groups of second/third year students were targeted: those who had completed an exchange program (Exchange students) in the second year of their course and those students who did not apply for such a program (Non-exchange students). Of the 40 students targeted for the Non-exchange group, 38

students returned questionnaires with useable responses. The sample consisted of 50% female and 50% male students with mean age of 21.94 years. Of the 32 students targeted in the Exchange group, 31 usable responses were returned. This sample consisted of 61% female and 39% male students with mean age of 23.39 years.

Measures

The dependent variable was the categorical variable Exchange /Non-exchange, where those students who had undertaken an exchange program were scored 1 and those students who had not undertaken an exchange program were scored 0. Openness was measured using Caligiuri, Jacobs and Farr's (2000) Openness scale. Tolerance of Ambiguity was measured using Buddner's (1962) 16-item instrument. The Cronbach Alpha reliability statistic was 0.65, which is at an acceptable level (Nunnally, 1978). All other measures are fairly self-explanatory and a copy of the questionnaire is available upon request.

RESULTS

Contingency tables along with the Chi-square statistic show the results for the test of statistical significance of the observed differences (and the study's hypotheses). The dependent variable, Exchange (Exchange 1, Non-exchange 0), is a dichotomous variable while all the independent variables were dichotomised at their respective means.

Table 1 examines the relationship between the personality variable, Openness, and Exchange. The result shows that whether students undertake an exchange program or not is dependent on students' level of Openness and this relationship is statistically significant. This provides support for H1. The relationship between the personality variable, Tolerance (tolerance of ambiguity) and Exchange is considered in Table 2. The results show that Exchange is dependent on a student's degree of tolerance for ambiguity and this relationship is statistically significant. This provides support for H2.

Table 1 Cross tabulation: Exchange * Openness^a

		EXCHANGE		Total
		Non-exchange	Exchange	
OPENNESS	Low open	27	5	32
	High open	11	26	37
Total		38	31	69

^aChi-square significance (Pearson) <.00

Table 2 Cross tabulation: Exchange * Tolerance^a

		EXCHANGE		Total
		Non-exchange	Exchange	
TOLERANCE	Low tolerance	27	11	38
	High tolerance	11	20	31
Total		38	31	69

^aChi-square significance (Pearson) <.00

The contingency table Speak a Foreign Language and Exchange (not shown) did not produce a statistically significant Chi-square; H3 is therefore not supported.

Table 3 examines the relationship between the number of years of study in a foreign language and whether the student has undertaken an exchange program or not. The results provide support for a relationship between the two variables. Therefore, H4 is supported.

Table 3 Cross tabulation: Exchange * Years Language Study^a

		EXCHANGE		Total
		Non-exchange	Exchange	
YEARS LANGUAGE STUDY	Low	27	15	42
	High	11	16	27
Total		38	31	69

^aChi-square significance (Pearson) <.05

The Chi-square was not significant for the contingency table describing the relationship between Prior Overseas Travel and Exchange (not shown), and so H5 was not supported. Table 4 supports the finding that the age of the student and Exchange are dependent. Overall, this provides some support for H6.

Table 4 Cross tabulation: Exchange * Age^a

		EXCHANGE		Total
		Non-exchange	Exchange	
AGE	Younger	28	16	44
	Older	8	15	23
Total		36	31	69

^aChi-square significance (Pearson) <.05

The results in Table 5 support a relationship between Exchange and Foreign Parents. Referring to the contingency table numbers, that relationship appears to be in the opposite direction to that hypothesized. Looking at the Exchange column, more students have Australian rather than foreign parents. Further, students of foreign parents were more likely *not* to undertake an exchange program. This result is statistically significant but in the opposite direction to that specified in H7.

Table 5 Cross tabulation: Exchange * Foreign Parents^a

		EXCHANGE		Total
		Non-exchange	Exchange	
PARENTS	Foreign	23	11	34
	Australian	15	20	35
Total		38	31	69

^aChi-square significance (Pearson) <.05

The results in Table 6 support a relationship between Exchange and Students' Cultural Background. Referring to the contingency table numbers, that relationship appears to mirror the results in the previous table in that students participating in an exchange program tend to be Australian (i.e., born in Australia). Further, referring to the Foreign student group (those not born in Australia), fewer students participated in a program (5) than did not (13). This result is in the opposite direction to that hypothesized and thus does not support H8.

Table 6 Cross tabulation: Exchange * Students' Cultural Background^a

		EXCHANGE		Total
		Non-exchange	Exchange	
CULTURAL BACKGROUND	Foreign	13	5	18
	Australian	25	26	51
Total		38	31	69

^aChi-square significance (Pearson) <.1

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined some of the factors that help explain why some Australian students participate in a tertiary exchange program and why others do not. Our analysis revealed that whether students participate in an exchange program or not is dependent on their level of Openness and on their Tolerance of Ambiguity. Students with a high degree of Openness and a high Tolerance of Ambiguity were more likely to participate in an exchange program, whereas students revealing a low degree of Openness and low Tolerance of Ambiguity were less likely to participate in an exchange program. The Davis et al. (1999) report suggested that the absence of a strong culture valuing international skills was the main hurdle to participation in study abroad programs. Our research suggests that student personality may be an important variable in student overseas study decisions. Indeed, it is interesting to speculate whether the two variables are linked in the sense that lower levels of openness and fear of uncertainty may be associated with a more 'closed' culture. Policy implications for our findings include the need for institutions to consider providing information sessions to allay anxiety, and the need for additional resources to support those students who feel threatened by the novel experience.

In terms of foreign immersion the results were mixed, but nevertheless interesting. Percentage of foreign friends was not associated with exchange program participation. The particular university setting where the research was conducted may have contributed to this result in that the university campus is very multicultural and one would expect most students to mix with different ethnic groups. The number of years a students had studied a foreign language was related to participation in a study abroad program. Foreign language study, which is an indicator of interest in another culture, could act as an impetus to study in that country. The ability to speak another language fluently, however, was not associated with participating in an exchange program.

Another interesting finding was that students who were not born in Australia and students whose parents were not born in Australia were less likely to participate in an exchange program. In other words, Australian students of Australian parents were more likely to participate in such programs. One can only speculate on the reasons behind this finding and further qualitative research may throw

light on this result. One could speculate that foreign students have already experienced another culture and thus are less motivated to partake in study abroad programs. It is also possible that the parents of foreign students are more protective of their children and do not encourage their children to travel, especially alone. Certainly there is some evidence that Greek and Italian families living in Australia are very (overly) protective of their children. Another possible explanation is that among some ethnic groups (eg Maltese) the tendency of parents to encourage assimilation of their children into the host culture might serve to discourage involvement in overseas exchange programmes (Terry, Borland and Adams 1993). If these speculations are true then administrators of such programs may need to increase the support given to students from such families and reassure the student's family. Such support may include designing information sessions for students and their parents aimed at presenting the personal and economic benefits of participating in an overseas exchange program and listening to concerns of students and parents in order to allay to anxieties about the program.

The results provide some evidence that older students may be more inclined to undertake an exchange program, whereas younger students may be less inclined. It is possible that older students not only have access to greater financial resources, but also are more mature, more confident and perhaps have had more worldly experiences to enable them to cope successfully with a period of study abroad. An implication of this finding is that perhaps younger students (say, less than 21) could be encouraged to undertake an exchange program later in their course (say, third year rather than second year). Younger students may require a higher level of support, such as assistance with travel and accommodation arrangements, predeparture information sessions on living and learning overseas and/or mentoring (travel to the same overseas institution with an older student).

This study represents an exploratory examination of some of the factors that may be associated with student exchange program participation. Despite limitations of small sample size and the general caveats associated with cross-sectional research, some interesting findings emerged that may provide guidance for administrators of such programs. Further research is required to other variables that may impact on participation in study abroad programs, particularly other personality characteristics (e.g.,

self-esteem, locus of control, self-efficacy). It would also be interesting to examine the influence of information/training sessions (for students and parents) on participation rates (especially for foreign students). Further qualitative research is required to examine the real fears and issues behind the non-participation of students, again particularly the fears, anxieties and issues behind the non-participation of students not born in Australia.

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