

Short-Term Business Study Abroad Programs as Part of the Business Education at Small and Medium-Sized Universities – A Franco-German Case Study

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Study abroad programs have become a regular feature at many universities worldwide. This paper presents a case study from Europe, involving a French and a German university. The focus is on the development of a joint short-term student exchange program for Business Administration students with a specialization in Marketing. Two examples of such short-term business study abroad programs are presented: a one week summer school type of event and an international marketing week. The benefits and the limitations of this concept will be discussed at the end of the paper. Also, recommendations for the development of short-term business abroad programs based on the experiences explained in the text will be provided.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the Problem

For students interested in spending some time abroad during their undergraduate or graduate studies they just have to browse the Internet to find numerous offers from institutions of higher education from around the world where they can spend some days, weeks, a semester or even a whole academic year.

Students are increasingly interested in studying abroad and many choose to do so for less than one semester, i.e., decide in favor of short-term study abroad programs (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004). In the United States of America for example, 45.1% of the Baccalaureate students and even 62.0% of the Master students studying abroad in 2007/08 opted for short-term programs, a term that includes all programs of less than 8 weeks of duration (Open Doors, 2009).

Many if not almost all universities have recognized this trend and are trying hard to prepare their students for a much more global workplace than it was the case twenty or thirty years ago. The internationalization of the curriculum thus has also resulted in an increase in the number of international study abroad programs (Thibadoux and Helms, 1989).

While internationalization is important for most higher education programs, it is particularly so for Business Administration programs since their graduates are often expected to easily work in multicultural work settings from the first day on the job.

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Perhaps, a larger university or college program will find it comparatively easy to design and implement an internationalization strategy. However, smaller universities have to keep up with this trend as well if they want to attract talented students and to rank high like for example on the CHE ranking in Germany (Zeit, 2010).

1.2. Context

Albstadt-Sigmaringen University is a public university in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg (Southern Germany). It has two campuses, one in the city of Albstadt the other in the town of Sigmaringen. Both cities are about 30 kilometers (19 Miles) apart from each other. The university offers Bachelor and Master level courses in the areas of Engineering, Life Sciences as well as Business and Computer Sciences. Currently (Summer 2010) the university has around 2.600 enrolled students. Of those, only a small fraction are international students.

The case study in this paper is based on experiences from the Bachelor of Science program in Business Administration.

2. Literature Review

While there is literature on the internationalization process of universities and other organizations of higher education (see for example Yang, 2002), little attention has been directed specifically toward short-term business study abroad programs and even less so on short-term study abroad programs particularly for smaller universities in Europe or elsewhere.

3. The Motivation

If this paper were written 10 years ago or so, I would probably be elaborating here on the importance of internationalization for companies in general and for business administration students in particular. The importance of internationalization today is a well accepted fact so that I will pass over this part.

For universities, even for smaller ones, internationalization does not only mean offering foreign language courses or supporting students' efforts to complete part of their studies abroad. It also means going beyond those classical means of internationalization. Regardless of the instrument of internationalization used, the general goal remains basically the same, i.e., to improve the intercultural competence and skills of the students.

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4. Examples

The following two examples show how such a concept can be implemented, based on two short-term programs from Albstadt-Sigmaringen University in cooperation with a French university from Paris.

4.1. European Academy of Business and Science (EABS) at the European Academy at Otzenhausen

This week-long program called “European Academy of Business and Science” (EABS) took place in April of 2009 in the small village of Otzenhausen, near the Franco-German border. Participants were students from a French university, located in Paris, and students from Albstadt-Sigmaringen University in Germany. The program was organized jointly by the two universities involved and the European Academy at Otzenhausen (EAO), a non-profit organization that teaches and does research on the European integration process, amongst others.

One of the purposes of the EABS was to find out whether the two universities would fit together, whether there would be common ground for a longer term relationship. Therefore it was crucial to involve students, lecturers, and researchers during the EABS.

Before this event, the two universities had not yet worked together. The reason to establish a contact between the universities was that there were prior personal contacts between professors of the two institutions and the will to make use of those pre-existing personal contacts.

The EABS was designed to introduce the participating students to issues ranging from the European integration process in general to a specific project to explore the international development of small and medium-sized enterprises in the so-called Saar-Lor-Lux region. The Saar-Lor-Lux area, also called the “Greater Region” is a European border region that consist of the country Luxembourg and the country districts of Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate (both Germany), Wallonia (Belgium), Moselle and Meurthe-et-Moselle (both France).

Both institutions could decide themselves how to select the students. In the case of the French university, German language skills were a key factor. For the selection of the German students, the choice was strongly based on language skills as well as a letter of motivation. It was agreed that both institutions could send 10 students to the EABS.

The EABS started with workshops and guest lectures by experts on the economic development of the border region. The 20 Franco-German business administration students, who for the most part were unfamiliar with the Saar-Lor-Lux region, learned about the business conditions for the companies located in that area and about the political and social environment there.

With the knowledge from those workshops and guest lectures the students were sent to field trips to about a dozen companies and other relevant organizations in the Saar-Lor-Lux region to investigate the internationalization approaches of

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companies in this European border region. They were able to talk to marketing, business development and other managers. After their return, the Franco-German student groups worked on specific issues they had encountered during their field trips to those companies and discussed possible solution alternatives.

At the end of the EABS, the student groups presented their findings in front of an audience that included the French consul general as well as other people from the business and political communities of the border region.

By judging from the questionnaire that all participants of the EABS returned at the end of the seminar, it became clear that everyone involved, students from both universities as well as the respective professors and staff members wanted to continue working together. Therefore the next phase was arranged: The International Marketing Week in Paris.

4.2. International Marketing Weeks in France and Germany

In March 2010, nine students from Albstadt-Sigmaringen University were chosen to take part in the International Marketing Week at the French university. Some of them were already participants of the EABS almost one year earlier. The International Marketing Week in Paris consisted of lectures by different local professors as well as a case study and final presentations. After successful completion of the International Marketing Week, the German students were awarded a certificate of participation as well as 3 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) points.

The two universities were convinced that a home-stay arrangement would provide more cultural insights into the respectively other culture. Therefore almost all German students could stay with a student from the French university. Some of the German students were staying at the apartments of the French students that took part in the EABS the previous year. Even weeks and months after that Marketing Week, participants maintained contacts with their hosts, mostly through social media like Facebook.

During the Marketing Week in Paris, the persons responsible for the internationalization of the Business Administration programs at Albstadt-Sigmaringen University, i.e., the dean of studies and the author of this paper, travelled to France to discuss the future of the relationship. Amongst others, it was decided to install this Marketing Week on a mutual basis, i.e., in spring of every year the event should take place in France and in the fall it would take place in Germany. It was agreed upon that both institutions could send up to 10 of their students to those international marketing weeks.

After the successful participation of the German students at the Marketing Week in Paris, the dean of study of the business administration programs, two Marketing professors, and the author of this paper therefore discussed the details of the corresponding International Marketing Seminar in Sigmaringen, Germany that was scheduled to take place late September / October 2010.

The outcome of this discussion and the subsequent efforts was a relatively detailed plan for the first Sigmaringen International Marketing Week (SIMW) in

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cooperation with the French university. The schedule contained elements of the last two successful joint events with the French partner institution. From the EABS event it was jointly decided to reserve one day during the week for company visits. The reason was that for one the study trips to companies were rated as excellent by students taking part in the EABS and also they would provide a real-life touch to the subject of Marketing that wouldn't be possible by just listening to lectures and working on paper based case studies. However, the main content of the SIMW were lectures, case studies and group projects on the subjects marketing communication and design marketing.

Another feature of the EABS that was implemented during the Sigmaringen International Marketing Week was that some after-class / leisure events were organized. This included for example an ice-breaker evening at the student café on the evening of the arrival of the French students. Also, an excursion on the first weekend of the seminar was scheduled to take place. During this excursion the students visited an automobile museum in Stuttgart, a city within easy reach from Sigmaringen. Since one of the topics of this Marketing Week was "Design Marketing" and because one if not the main attraction of this museum was design (architecture as well as of course cars) it was considered a supporting excursion for the seminar and not just a pure leisure excursion.

The SIMW that took place from 30 September 2010 until 8 October 2010 was a mandatory seminar for students in the 7th semester of the curriculum of the Bachelor of Business Administration Program in Sigmaringen town. It was part of a regular module called "Marketing Seminar", which is part of the concentration in Marketing. The SIMW was a success based on returned questionnaires about the seminar as well as discussions with the participants. It is therefore intended to continue with this event in the future.

5. Summary and Conclusions

5.1 Benefits of the Concept

There are quite a number of benefits of such a short-term study-abroad program over traditional semester or year-long study abroad programs.

They are cheaper than full study abroad programs. Especially now with relatively affordable and sometimes even cheap airfare within countries, continents and even between continents (e.g., USA-Latin America) the transportation cost have not the weight anymore that they had in, say the 1970s or 1980s. Within Europe for example, it is often easy to get from one city to the other easily by high-speed train. These train services often are affordable. Students at the receiving university are, as the case study has shown, willing to take a guest student for free for the duration of the study abroad program. So in essence, if the sending university pays for the transportation cost, as was the case for the French university, the additional cost for the outgoing students are almost zero. This has proven a decisive point in the program mentioned here. That means, the financially not-so-well off students were able to take part in such a program. A more costly full study abroad program would have been difficult to finance for some of the students. The short-term study abroad program therefore made studying at a foreign partner university for that group of students possible. For

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financially less fortunate students or during economically challenging times this type of study abroad program seems to be especially suited.

Another positive point one should mention is that this type of study abroad program doesn't disrupt much the regular program, i.e., one can continue with the regular classes without much of a disruption. This can be said for the sending as well as for the receiving university.

As the students from the involved universities lived together for several days they were integrated into the local life of the receiving country. Therefore the students didn't get the feeling of doing some kind of holiday trip or such.

Many students have steady boyfriends / girlfriends / fiancées; others already have children and don't want to leave them behind for a whole semester or longer. The same goes for other family members and even sideline jobs many students hold. Being away for less than two weeks is manageable for most students however.

Another positive effect of this program was that it added another perspective to business, education and culture for students and educators alike. Both, the integration of foreign students as well as the integration of foreign faculty members in a single course or module enhanced the cross-cultural skills of students as well as lecturers. The majority of the participants of the Sigmaringen International Marketing Week said that this event improved their cultural sensitivity. This is in line with what other researchers have found after analyzing similar short-term study-abroad programs (Anderson, Lawton et al., 2006).

Study abroad programs, whether a short-term or a full-term version, enhances the international profile of a university, something that especially for smaller institutions of higher education is otherwise harder to accomplish. Also, offering short-term study abroad programs shows interested parties (potential students and employers) that the university cares about intercultural competence.

One effect of the Sigmaringen International Marketing Week was that, when asked, almost all the German students were interested in taking part in the following event taking place in France. When asked before the start of the seminar, the reaction was rather lackluster. One can therefore say that short-term programs are a trigger for some students to go abroad later on. It will be interesting to see in two or three years whether the German students that were taking part in the seminar will complete part of their Bachelor or Master thesis abroad for example.

5.2 Limitations of the Concept

For a short-term program as described in this paper it has proven impossible to award the full ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) points that a student would usually get for taking a full course. After taking into account the actual face-to-face instruction, the directed and undirected self-study period as well as the preparation time, it was determined that only half of the regular ECTS points for the program could be awarded to the participating students from the partner university.

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Naturally, a student living for 10 days in a foreign country, even if he or she is fully integrated into student life, will not be able to immerse to such a degree in a different culture as would be the case for students going abroad for one full semester.

The lack of language skills, i.e., French/German has proven to be a minor problem. While all of the French students and some of the German students had some language skills in the respectively other language, most of the communication took place in the English language. All of the students were surveyed at the end of the marketing seminar and no one said that the language skills were a major problem in accomplishing the outcome of the seminar. Still, the intercultural effect could have been better had both groups possessed very good French, respectively German language skills.

Whether by participating in such short-term programs really leads to more competent business managers is difficult to assess. Also, much of the assessment here is based on qualitative data and not on quantitative / statistical data.

The International Marketing seminar took place in the third year of studies. This program therefore might have come too late during the undergraduate studies. It might have been better to offer a similar program two semesters earlier as a kind of an “appetizer” for example for an internship abroad or a complete study semester in a foreign country.

The questionnaire the students had to fill out at the end of the seminar revealed that the students’ self-evaluation regarding improvements in cultural sensitivity and their communication skills in an international context was noticeable but - all-in-all - rather weak.

Another potential problem was the lack of integration of courses and curricula. Both institutions have very different courses and curricula. It was a challenge integrating the seminars into the regular courses offered at both institutions.

5.3 Conclusion

In this paper I have explained a concept to develop a short-term study abroad program for a smaller university. Since this paper is based on an actual case study this was not so much about statistics and numbers but more on the content side of short-term study abroad programs.

From a conceptual side, I explained that the process started with a get to know seminar in a – one could say – ‘neutral’ location. After the seminar was rated a success, the process continued with the exchange of students who took part in courses / modules at the partner institution.

This type of study abroad program can be considered complimentary to full study abroad programs that take a complete semester. Although due to their limited length they are limited in depth and breadth they do provide a good addition to full study programs.

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As a summary one can say that this is a pragmatic approach to expose students to an international experience.

5.4. Outlook

Apart from the potential to let students from both universities take part in modules other than Marketing, cooperation in research is contemplated.

5.5 Recommendations

After analyzing those three events one could see the following success factors for the development of a short-term study abroad program at a smaller institution of higher education:

The most important success factor proved to be communication. That especially includes communication between the people managing the study programs and the international efforts of those programs. They have to have a good understanding of the other's intentions and views. Otherwise upcoming problems especially during the preparation phase could become irreconcilable. In the case of the two universities involved, communication had been excellent.

Another success factor is student selection. The outgoing students should be motivated to take part in such a program. This motivation can come from various areas. The selected French students for example all took German classes during their regular studies. One could therefore expect that this group of student was interested in some kind of student exchange with a German university. Some of the German students that were sent to France one semester earlier already took part in the EABS in the spring of 2009. Especially these students were very interested to become a short-term student at the French partner university.

Other critical factors for the success or failure of such a type of short-term business study abroad program include the timing, the support from the dean, and the travel time. The timing is important in various respects: For one, study programs in different countries might start at different times of the year. Also, it seems to make sense to place such a seminar at a time with little or no exams to take so that the students can better focus on the full range of activities offered during the international week. For such a short program, it doesn't make sense for the students to travel more than a couple of hours. Therefore, they appear to be suited especially for universities from neighboring countries or countries within easy reach.

The support of the respective deans of studies of the two institutions of higher education involved has proven to be crucial for the success or failure of such a program as without their backing the long-term prospects of such a for the university time-consuming project would appear to be in jeopardy.

Also, the role of the instructors should be pre-defined and the standards for granting ECTS points to students of the other university should be set. The instructors can take on the role of lecturer only. In that case there must be other academic staff available that takes care of the organizational issues involving these types of short-term business study abroad programs. Both universities

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should have a similar framework and similar requirements for the students from the respectively other university to get academic credit points.

And finally, it has proven helpful to include extra-academic program points to make the event more interesting and fun and to help in the bonding process of students from the universities involved. That can include excursions or an organized sports event. On the other hand however, too many pre-organized events would leave the students with too little freedom to discover the guest university and its surroundings on their own.

5.6 Further Research

There is a lot of potential for research. For example, one research area could be focusing on the future of global / transnational universities. Another area of research could further investigate the success factors of short-term study abroad programs. Also, students should be regularly and systematically asked about the benefits of their short-term study abroad experience.

Another possible research area would be to investigate the development of short-term study abroad programs in the different fields of study. There could possibly be interesting findings if one would compare social sciences with natural sciences fields of study. These and other research areas should be done to shed light on the future direction of business education for the benefit of all.

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