LESSONS FROM THREE WEEK STUDY TOURS TO EUROPE – A MODEL FOR FACULTY ENGAGEMENT INTO ASIA

Dr Blair Kuys, Swinburne University of Technology, Faculty of Design

Dr Scott Thompson-Whiteside, Swinburne University of Technology, Faculty of Design

ABSTRACT

Australia is currently living in the Asian Century. In 2012, the Study Abroad office at Swinburne University changed its policy for exchange to ensure that each student applying for an exchange position has at least one Asian destination in their list of preferences to expose them to the possibilities of Asian destinations. Short-term study tours within the Faculty of Design have also shifted direction to provide further engagement with our Asian neighbours – evidenced by tours to Vietnam, Hong Kong and Taiwan in 2012.

This paper illustrates how the development and refinement of study tours to Europe has provided a platform and model for student mobility and future engagement in Asia. It describes how, in response to the imbalance of outgoing/incoming students to/from Asia over the last eight years, the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology has facilitated a strategic change in direction towards Asia through short-term study tours.

It is argued that an existing European study tour model provides academic and study abroad staff with a successful framework for developing and conducting study tours to other destinations. The paper highlights how this model was refined and re-focused on Asian destinations, and how difficulties such as language, quality, student and staff engagement, accreditation and student enrolment were managed. The success of the model is evidenced by the fact that within the Faculty of Design 18% of all graduating domestic undergraduate students have completed an international experience during their studies. This compares with the national average of almost 12%. From a faculty perspective, short-term study tours provide an affordable, and perhaps less intimidating way (for both staff and students) to strategically grow student mobility and create meaningful engagement with Asia.
INTRODUCTION

There are three areas this paper seeks to address to inform the reader of methods used to develop successful study tours to Asia. The first is the framework in which current European study tours operate, the second is how this framework has been adapted to suit an Asian context, and the third provides guidance for those who wish to develop a study tour that may lead to successful outcomes. The following outlines how study tours form a key component of internationalisation for the Faculty’s overall strategy and explains the reasoning behind redirecting study tours into Asia.

Design and the intercultural dimensions of internationalisation at Swinburne

Design is a global, multi-disciplinary profession that meets people’s needs and draws from national and international resources. Good design requires understanding of social, cultural and economic needs in a cross-cultural environment. The Swinburne study tour programs for design students provide opportunities for students to gain an intensive study-abroad experience combined with culturally enriched content relating to the design industry. Students have the opportunity to learn about the parallels and differences in design thinking, practice, methodologies and the social/historical influences on design through: cultural visits to industry and design studios, relevant design/media organisations or government bodies, art, design and media schools and universities, museums and culturally enriching sites.

The benefits and outcomes are transformational for most design students (Kuys & Thompson-Whiteside, 2011). Students enhance their awareness of design as a global profession, understand the importance of cross-cultural innovation and have greater knowledge of the international career prospects open to them.

For the Faculty of Design, internationalisation is a response to the globalisation of the profession and the need for graduates to be ‘global citizens’. Swinburne’s Faculty of Design aims to produce transnational designers who are sensitive to diverse cultures and understand the opportunities of cross-cultural innovation. This is framed within a broader internationalisation strategy at Swinburne, which integrates international, intercultural and global dimensions into the University’s mission, programs, delivery models, research, community service, and the general staff and student experience. This has been a key component of Swinburne’s Statement of Direction 2015.

For the Faculty of Design, study tours and outward-bound mobility are key components of the overall strategy for internationalisation. In 2010, the percentage of domestic design graduates in Swinburne who had undertaken an international study experience was 18 %. This compared with 12 % as an average across Australian Universities (Olsen, A. 2011). Of the 18,340 international study experiences across Australian universities, 37.4 % went to Europe, 24.3 % went to the Americas, 31.8 % went to Asia. Nearly 32 % of all outward-bound international experiences in Australia were short-term study tours. This compared with 48 % of all international experiences being short-term study tours in Swinburne’s Faculty of Design in 2010.

An important aspect of internationalisation is internationalisation of the curriculum. Leask (2009, p. 209) defines this as a process of incorporating an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum and the teaching and learning arrangements. While it is not suggested that a three-week experience of participating on a study tour is any kind of answer for deep, intercultural competence, it does provide students with strategies to apply cross-cultural adaptability. Hutchings et al. (2002) state, short-term study tours provide students with some skills in achieving cross-cultural understanding and recognises that as future professionals in their respective field, they will live in a society increasingly characterised by international labour mobility and multiculturalism.
This paper also acknowledges work done by Sanders and Ward (1970), Goodwin and Nacht (1988), Opper (1990) and Hutchins (1996), who all reinforce the importance of broadening student experience through their total immersion in another culture, regardless of the duration.

**STUDY TOUR FRAMEWORK**

All study tours have been organised following Porth’s (1997) three-phase framework: a pre-departure program; the tour itself; and a post-tour debriefing session. This model has been applied for all study tours within the Faculty of Design.

The organisation of study tours within the Faculty of Design is a joint effort between an administrator, 1–2 academic staff who will lead the tour, and the Associate Dean International to ensure the study tour is tactically aligned with the university’s strategic direction and has appropriate learning outcomes. The role of an administrator cannot be understated in helping with student inquiries, accommodation, travel, logistics etcetera. This allows the tour leader to concentrate on the scheduling of tour activities and ensuring the itinerary matches the learning objectives for the students involved. The value of the study tour is to incorporate cross-cultural understanding through an appropriate mix of cultural experiences, academic rigor, relevant industry visits and free time. Free time seems odd in the context of an academic experience, however this has proven to be one of the most important aspects of a successful tour. Students do not want to be forced into a strict schedule that they must adhere to for the entire duration. Independent exploration is valuable for students to become aware of their surroundings and appreciate the new cultures they are in. This learning experience is unintended and happens purely through the act of participation, and is just as important as all other aspects that make up a study tour.

All study tours within the Faculty of Design have been organised following Porth’s (1997) three-phase framework: a pre-departure program; the tour itself; and a post-tour debriefing session. The following now elaborates each phase of the framework as applied to the current European focused three-week study tours.

**Phase one: Pre-departure program**

The pre-departure program consists of a meeting with the student participants and their parents to clarify the intentions of the tour and to inform participants of critical information. Areas that are covered include safety, responsibility (especially with alcohol), money/currency, appropriate clothing for cold climates, luggage, food, and cultural differences that the student will encounter. This information is important to relay, as there are some students who have never travelled overseas before and perhaps are not aware of certain things that others may see as obvious.

Parents are invited to this event, as quite often they can be more anxious than the student involved. For many, this is the first time their son or daughter will be away from home. It is also important to have the parents feel involved, as they are usually the ones funding the tour for their son or daughter with the expectation that this international experience will add value to their degree. An important aspect is to try and make the parents feel connected throughout the study tour. The best way of doing this is to provide the personal mobile phone number and the email address of the tour leader to the parents and ensure that if an email is sent, it is replied to as soon as possible. Piece of mind for the parents should be a high priority.

The second major area that is covered in the pre-departure program is a greater insight into the cultural differences of the destination(s) the tour will be within. Students are required to complete a graded assessment task that involves research of the country in relation to his or her set project brief. This research report is taken with them and used to influence the design
process that leads to more appropriate design outcomes. It also acts as an important tool for the students to have a basic level of understanding and expectations before departing. A third and more recent addition to the pre-departure program is a pre-departure dinner. The initial introductions and conversations enable students to start forming a collegial bond, which is essential when living together for three weeks. These casual gatherings continue at group dinners and organised site visits throughout the tour and when they return to Australia at the study tour exhibition.

Phase two: The Study Tour

This section outlines the issues, challenges, benefits and opportunities that a study tour can bring. The barriers, expectations and outcomes are elucidated to provide guidance on short-term study tours in design.

The tour itself comprises a three-week mix of relevant industry visits and cultural experiences associated with the disciplines represented on the tour. As part of this three-week trip a one-week university based project is completed by each student adding academic rigor to his or her tour experience. The project topics differ each year, but the important aspect is to ensure the Australian students integrate with other nationalities to broaden their learning experiences. This is done by randomly pairing an Australian student with a student studying at the host institution.

The example used in this paper is a study tour to Germany (2011) for Industrial Design and Product Design Engineering students. In our experience when organising study tours to Germany a major challenge has been finding academics prepared to collaborate with the study tour group. A contributing factor relates to their confidence with English and their willingness to accommodate the study tour participants for the duration of the project. This was overcome by engaging with a German professor who teaches the exchange students in an international classroom environment at the host institution. For Australian students this proved to be a positive aspect of the tour, as the study tour participants were exposed to a wider range of cultures. In total, there were 12 Australian students working in collaboration with students from Germany, India, China, Turkey, South Korea, Russia, Indonesia, Poland and Japan. It is our view that this multicultural experience is invaluable for a student, as different ways of working are observed and new ideas are created.

The students are organised into groups to work on a design project that addresses a social issue within a German context. They have a week to generate appropriate concepts that address the project brief and the Australian students will continue to refine their project outcomes upon return to Australia. For the academics what is important is not that the students complete the project while abroad, but the learning that arise out of the interaction. A one-week project is a short period of time to develop an appropriate concept addressing the brief, however the value of working with a foreign partner — led jointly by German and Australia professors — on complex issues is more important than the outcome itself. At the conclusion of the project each group presents a final concept of their design solution to the given brief at the host institution. Due to occasional language difficulties students are forced to spend more time on their presentations to ensure the imagery presented is self-explanatory. In the field of design this is of high importance to convey a clear message of the intended project outcome without being able to verbally communicate this. Upon return to Australia the study tour students are required to refine their chosen concept and create a rapid prototype model and visual renderings that are assessed and displayed at the post-tour exhibition.
Each study tour operates on the principle one to twelve ratio of one academic staff member to students. Although 1:12 is the preferred ratio, the faculty has also conducted tours with a ratio of 2:24 students. However, 2:24 ratio creates a new set of problems from accommodation, logistics of moving on public transport and making visits to industry – particularly design studios, which tend to be small businesses.

One key objective of the European study tour is to develop a learning experience that cannot be replicated by a student who wishes to travel to these destinations outside the university environment — that is, something that cannot be planned by a travel agent. The inclusion of a university-based project and links with known companies ensures this doesn’t happen. The academic rigor endured before, during and after the study tour also warrants the classification of the study tour being a recognised unit of study by the university. Swinburne alumni who have gained employment in the study tour destinations are also drawn upon and used effectively to gain a greater insight into prominent organisations around the world — adding even more value to the student experience. Linking with alumni working in fields relevant to the discipline inspires students, as they see first-hand where their education can take them.

An example of this was linking with an alumnus currently employed as a senior industrial designer at Braun in Frankfurt. Braun is one of Germany’s largest product design companies and is recognised worldwide for its innovative designs. General public visits are possible to the showroom, which is a good display showing the history of Braun products, but by linking with an alumnus working for Braun the study tour group was given the opportunity to go beyond the showroom and into the design studio. This is an experience that is only possible because of the connection with an alumnus, and it is an inspirational experience for the
students to see the ‘front-end’ of the design process for one of the world’s leading design companies.

Typical tourist activities that would usually take place in these destinations are not overlooked. If a student were to travel to a certain country and not have time to see things they would like to see they could leave with a negative experience. As mentioned within the introduction it is important to create a successful balance for the students to maximise their experience.

Our experience suggests language barriers do not seem to inhibit design students as they perhaps do with other disciplines such as business for example. This is supported by Pan et al. (2002) in a study of industrial designers making concept design sketches, which found that the designers used verbal language to describe the form of design in very individual ways; language that was not clear, consistent or commonly understood by others. However, the idea of defining a common vocabulary of design seems to be more or less idealistic. Bucciarelli (2002) notes that even though participants in design may share a common language, such as English, this language can be used in such specific ways that, in reality, it seems like a participant is speaking a different language.

Essentially, this means that design teams, global ones in particular, not only face the challenge of negotiating shared understanding between, for example, people with varying language proficiency, but they also face the challenge of negotiating understanding between people coming from completely different object worlds – depending on, for example, cultural and educational backgrounds and professional disciplines (Bucciarelli, 2002).

To relate this to international study tours, a study by Hutchings et al. (2002), described an analysis of 50 Australian business students who participated in a short-term study tour to China. It was highlighted in this study that the most notable differences in coping with a differing culture were between the students of Chinese ethnicity and the non-Chinese students. The primary advantage held by the students of Chinese ethnicity (including Singaporeans, Malaysians and Taiwanese) was their ability to speak Mandarin. Obviously sharing a common language will make the study tour experience easier, however in the field of design it is encouraged for students to mix with people who don’t share a common language to delve deeper into the learning experience that a new culture brings.

An identified concern with international design teams is how to successfully manage the process of reaching a shared understanding of the domain, the requirements, the object of work, the design process itself and the roles and commitments of team members. Design is, according to Bucciarelli (2002), “as much a matter of getting different people to share a common perspective, to agree on the most significant issues, and to shape consensus on what must be done next, as it is a matter of concept formation, evaluation of alternatives, costing and sizing.”

The working patterns observed within the student groups in this paper show that designers have a creative vocabulary, which has rich meanings in design communication. In the context of global collaboration between diverse work groups the notion of a common vocabulary of design is very appealing (Pan et al., 2002), (Larson, 2003).

While design students still have problems with language differences, the collaborative project work we require students to do forces the participants to develop project outcomes that clearly communicate the intentions of the project brief without the use of language. This process creates an element of uncertainty and nervousness amongst some students who have never found themselves in this situation before. While the majority of groups share a common language in the collaboration projects delivered in the recent 2011 German study tour, there were a select few that didn’t. An example of this was highlighted when an Australian student who was on his first overseas trip — and who only spoke English — was
paired with a Korean student who spoke Korean and German and no English. Both students were out of their comfort zone and while the earlier stages of their collaborative work were challenging, they soon became familiar with what they had to do to progress their project without the use of a common language. This involved communication through sketching and developing ideas to a level that both members could comprehend. Out of the 12 groups involved, the Australian/Korean pairing produced the highest-quality result at the conclusion of the project. The reasons for this were identified as more thorough development work in the earlier stages of the design process done purely to communicate individual intentions while indvertibly successfully developing the project. This was identified when the project was assessed by observing a diverse range of design concepts before the student pairing were fixed on the final design solution. Another identified reason was both students didn’t want to let each other down, as verbal justifications and explanations were not possible. This example shows that an intense international experience such as this can create change in common working patterns and provide valuable learning experiences that would not be possible at the home institution.

Phase three: Post-tour debriefing

The post-tour debriefing is in the form of an exhibition which is held in the first week of the following academic semester. This provides a good platform for reflection and students work harder on their project outcomes knowing they will be exhibited to the public. A travel journal is also submitted at this time as a permanent reminder of the study tour.

The post-tour exhibition also acts as a successful promotional tool for future study tours as new cohorts have the opportunity to see the outcomes of the returning study tour students, giving them a clear understanding of what can be expected if they embark on the tour.

THE SHIFT TO ASIA AS A SITE FOR FUTURE SHORT-TERM STUDY TOURS

For study tours (and for exchange) in Swinburne, Western Europe is currently the most popular destination. The shift towards Asia is difficult as student desire is not as strong, but the Faculty has decided to use study tours as a platform to change this behaviour. Because of this, the development of Asian study tours requires more consideration and effort to ensure the value of the study tour is highlighted.

Study tours to Asia are not developed as a token effort to merely tick the boxes of the university’s intentions. The reason tours are shifting to Asia is that many Australian students are aware of Asia’s dominance but don’t understand why. Design especially has a big role to play by providing more sophisticated services to a growing middle class within countries such as China, India, South Korea and many ASEAN countries. These countries will form the core consumers of design over the next fifty years.

In an Australian Government report titled “National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools” (2006), it explains the importance of why Australian students need to link closely to Asia. While this report is directed at a secondary level, the same applies to tertiary education. The fact that Swinburne Faculty of Design is ensuring all students have the opportunity to engage with Asia at some stage during their degree reflects this importance. Australian’s require new skills, knowledge and understanding related to the Asian region as Asia is an important economic partner which is inextricably linked to the future growth of Australia.

Statistics from the 2011 Australian Census show 27 % of Australians were born overseas. The proportion of these that were born in Asia has grown from 24 % in 2009 to 33 % in 2011. This equates to almost 1.75 million Australians who were born in Asia.
The shift to ensure students better understand the potential of Asia through short-term study tours aims to take advantage of a market that represents more than three billion people. Economic development in China and India in particular will result in unprecedented markets for Australia – and strengthened competition. Increased education and affluence in those countries mean new competing business and workforce capacity globally (National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools, 2006. p. 6).

The framework developed for running study tours in Western Europe has provided a model for the expansion of study abroad in Asia. The Faculty of Design has made the decision to strategically engage with Asia and the repositioning of study tours is a good means to do this. The reason being is because a three-week cultural immersion within a group is less intimidating than a semester-long exchange as an individual. The presence of a full-time Swinburne academic staff member creates a more controlled and structured schedule that provides comfort for many students, particularly those who have never been overseas.

Through the success of the European framework over the past eight years, two Asian short-term study tours have been developed for 2012 covering destinations of Hong Kong, Vietnam and Taiwan. A plan to include a Korea/China study tour in 2013 is currently being developed. The framework in which these are developed is in accordance with the successful elements from the previous tours. These include:

- An informative pre-departure meeting that ensures students have a basic understanding of the cultural differences they will be exposed to.
- A tour that has an appropriate balance of academic projects, cultural visits, industry visits and free time.
- A tour leader who is familiar with the study tour destination and ensures an itinerary is developed that adds significant value to the student participants.
- A collaborative project linked with a host institution
- A post-tour exhibition to reflect on the study tour outcomes.

The above statements have formed the basis of the new study tours offered at the Faculty of Design for Asian destinations.

**ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDY TOUR LEADERS**

Short-term study tours operate at many different institutions in Australia and different models have been developed to suit the needs and future directions of these institutions. The following points are to inform readers who may be interested in developing their own study tours by highlighting successful elements that have been developed over the past eight years:

- The study tour leader needs to have administrative support helping with student’s inquiries, accommodation, travel, logistics etc.
- The study tour leader must prepare significantly before departure. Schedules, itineraries, travel and meeting times must be carefully detailed. Use new technologies such as Google Maps on smart devices and provide PDF copies. Ensure leaders have local SIM and Wi-Fi access for roaming Internet services in each country. The accessibility and portability of navigation devices creates less intimidation for students and less concern for the leader.
- If the tour is run for the first time and if time permits, it is advised to visit specific locations before taking the students. This is particularly important in colder climates where negative temperatures can be detrimental to travel plans. In the development of both Asian study tours, each tour leader was given funds to spend one week in each destination, conducting research and to finalise visits.
• A ratio of one study tour leader for 12 students is advisable. This is a manageable size for site visits, university collaboration and everyday activities such as group dinners.
• Relationships that are formed during tours need to be followed up to continually update future tours. This is especially important in the field of design to stay abreast with new and emerging technologies.
• Basing the tour around a maximum of three cities to avoid continuous travel and to minimise costs.
• Three-week duration is an appropriate time frame for student participation and keeps costs reasonable.

CONCLUSION

Design is a global profession giving greater importance for student exposure to other cultures in which one day they may work, or at least engage with in some form. Designer’s work with clients, suppliers and manufactures from all over the world. The end users of their products and services are often in another country. Thus, the ability for design students to integrate cultural understanding and empathy through design projects is an important graduate attribute.

Australia needs to focus on developing a skilled and educated population, deal forthrightly with Asia and promote excellence if it is to be a leader in the Asian Century. The Asian Century presents many challenges and opportunities for Australians. Designers who graduate with an appreciation of Asian culture, influence and maturity, will enhance their skills and intellect to keep Australia at the cutting edge of a global knowledge economy. Australia needs to prepare and position for a new Asia, one that is generating both new knowledge and new demands at a rapid pace (Prime Minister’s Manufacturing Taskforce, 2012).

Study tours provide a controlled and regulated environment for learning to take place in an overseas destination. The model of integrating and developing a project with a host institution combined with industry visits and excursions to places of cultural significance has worked well in Europe. We believe the model provides a suitable framework for expanding and diversifying the international student experiences into Asia. A three-week study tour may seem small in the scheme of international exposure; however, it provides an influential introduction to the necessities of a successful transnational design career.

REFERENCES


