

# A SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY FROM AUSTRALIA

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses the case study approach to investigate perception of a small group of undergraduate information technology students from an Australian university participating in a short-term international mobility program. Findings show that students viewed the experience positively and they have gained international experience and cross-cultural awareness. Limitations to this study include relatively small sample size and reliance of self-report perception.

**Keywords:** International mobility program, International internship, International work placement

## INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning through work-based experience, such as internship, work placement and work-based learning, enables students to learn through discovery and exploration in authentic professional environment [15]. Studies consistently show that employers continue to place the greatest emphasis on relevant industry experience, and internship is viewed as a desirable pathway for students to achieve this goal [4]. Programs such as internship and work placement also help students to crystallize their careers choice [3] [6] [22]. More students are seeking international work placement and internship to gain international experience and cross-cultural awareness [2] [7] [13] [18]. Research into international work placement and internship has been reported in disciplines such as marketing and international business [6] [18] [19], public health [3], nursing [23], teaching [2] and agriculture [18]. In the discipline of information technology (IT), while industry-relevant program with integrated work-based learning has been reported by [16] and [22], however there has been little research reported on international work placement or internship for IT students.

This paper investigates the experience of a small group of Australian undergraduate students participating in a short-term international mobility program to Malaysia, a developing country in Southeast Asia. The students were funded by the New Colombo Plan (NCP) mobility program, an Australian government initiative to support Australian undergraduate students in short-term study in the Indo-Pacific region that includes countries located along the Pacific and Indian Oceans [5] [12]. Using a case study approach, the data were collected through a survey questionnaire and open-ended questions investigating students' in-country experience from the perspectives of learning and cultural awareness.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes background of the NCP mobility program. Section 3 discusses the research aim and research method. Section 4 details survey results. Section 5 presents discussion and limitation of study. Finally section 6 concludes the paper.

## PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Students enrolled in a Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) course at a regional Australian university are required to undertake a short-term work placement as part of the course requirement with

local business organizations. In 2015 ten students were successful in obtaining a travel grant, of amount AUD3000 per student, to participate in a four-week international mobility program to Malaysia. The students participated in this program were BIT students who are either major in network management or e-business.

The students were assigned to two local business organizations. The first organization was a large global IT service provider, and the second organization was a national IT research and development agency. For the group of students with the network management major, they were given a consultancy project to propose a network security solution for a small enterprise. For students with e-business major, they were assigned to a project to design a “mobile backend as a service” to provide near real-time notifications for their customers. All students were briefed on the project requirements on the first day of the project commencement during the meet-and-greet session with the supervisors from the local host institution and the employer organizations. As part of the assessment, they were required to do a presentation during mid-point of the project and a final presentation to the senior executives of the employer organization at the end of the program. Each group was also required to submit a final report with recommendations to the employer organizations at the conclusion of the program.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research aim**

The aim of this study is to investigate experience of the students participating in the NCP program based on the in-country experience from the perspectives of learning and cultural awareness. The study also investigates perception of students regarding pre-departure support.

### **Research method**

A case study approach was used for this study. The case study approach was selected because the nature of the study was exploratory and descriptive with the goal to use data collected in this study to provide an explanation of an existing scenario [17]. In this study the objective is to gain a better understanding of students’ perception of the international mobility program experience and their opinions of experience in terms of learning and cultural awareness.

A human research ethics application was submitted to the university and approval was granted to conduct the study. Participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and all responses were anonymous. The survey was posted online using Google+ form to gather the data. The link to the survey instrument was emailed to the students and remained available for two weeks. The questionnaire collects data on student profile, students’ in-country experiences using Likert-type questions and an open-text section for students to describe their overall experience which includes: relevance of their academic background to the project assigned; most rewarding, disappointing and challenging experiences; the change in perspective because of participation in the program; and skills gained from the international experience.

## **RESULTS**

Ten students were invited to participate in the survey. Seven responses were received with the majority of the students in the age group of twenty to twenty-five. Two students had prior internship experience and one of them had an international internship experience. Five students did not have any prior internship experience; however, four students had some relevant work experience. All students felt excited about the opportunity to participate in the program. Table 1 shows the main reason cited by students in applying for the NCP program, Table 2 shows expectation of students on the program. Students have also expressed

their concerns in undertaking international experience, these include “lack of confidence whether I can do the job in a different country and different culture”, “lack of preparation and training needed to perform my tasks in a different country and different culture”, “lack of cultural awareness to do the job assigned to me”, “lack of language skills to communicate with the employer”, and “lack of language skills to communicate with local people in day to day situations”.

**Table 1.** Main reason to apply for the program

<i>Main reason to apply</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
A funded opportunity to travel overseas.	1
An opportunity too good to miss.	2
To gain international experience to work with international employer.	4

**Table 2.** Expectation of the program

<i>Expectation at the end of mobility program</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
Be able to link theoretical concepts learned in the class to real workplace problems and situations in international organisation.	1
Gaining real life international experience in my field of study.	4
Increased international and cross-cultural knowledge and experience.	1
Validate my career choice and see if I am really suited for international job I am being trained at the university.	1

Students were asked to rate seventeen statements regarding their in-country experience using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Table 3 shows the mean rating for each statement. Cronbach’s alpha was computed to measure internal consistency of these questions, a coefficient of 0.84 was found indicating reliability of the questions. The results indicated the students were satisfied with the overall in-country experience in Malaysia.

**Table 3.** Students’ experience in Malaysia

<i>Students’ experience in Malaysia</i>	<i>Mean rating</i>
I was satisfied with the Welcome session organized by local partner institution.	5.00
I was satisfied with the project kick-off session.	4.57
I was satisfied with the local assistance provided by local partner institution.	4.86
I was satisfied with placement employer assigned to me.	4.29
I was satisfied with the facilities provided by local partner institution.	4.57
I was satisfied with social activities organized by local partner institution.	4.71
The local partner institution had provided me with the necessary information to help during the 4-week in Malaysia.	4.86
The local partner institution had provided me with the necessary facilities to help me in completing the employer project.	4.57
The local partner institution had provided me with the necessary project information to enable me to complete the project.	4.43
My placement employer had provided me with the necessary information to enable me to complete the project.	3.43
I met with my local partner institution supervisor regularly and had on-going feedback.	4.43
I met with my employer supervisor regularly and had on-going feedback.	3.57
I was satisfied with the project assigned to me.	4.14
The project assigned to me was consistent to my ability.	4.00
The project assigned to me was challenging and simulating.	5.00
The project assigned to me provided sufficient learning opportunities.	4.71
Overall the project had prepared me to enter the real world in my area of study.	4.57

The students were asked to describe their overall experience in the program using free-text responses. The questions included relevance of project to their academic background, the most rewarding, disappointing and challenging experience, change in perspective as a result of participating in the program, experiences and skills gained from the program.

Manual coding method adopted from [8] was used to identify major themes of responses for each question. major themes identified for each question are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Major themes identified for each open-ended question

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Main themes identified</i>
Relevance of academic background	Programming; Network; E-business.
Meeting expectations?	International experience.
Most rewarding aspect	New skills; New culture; Real world experience.
Most disappointing or challenging aspect	Not working at employer's premise; Weather.
Change in perspective	Culture.
Specific skills gained	Perspective on international career; Technical skills.
Advice to future students	Go for it; Be open-minded.
Most positive experience of NCP program	Meeting new people.
Most positive experience at host institution	Friendliness of local people.
Information to share	Ask questions; Enjoy cultural aspect.

The two projects which were assigned to the students included a network security project and a project to develop near real-time notifications for customers. Students had identified programming, network and e-business knowledge studied in the course as relevant to the assigned projects. The results also show that all students had gained international experience as a result of participating in this program. The students had also indicated gaining new skills, new cultures and real world experience as the most rewarding aspects of this program. However the students had expressed disappointment that they were not able to spend more time at the employers' premises. Nevertheless, they were satisfied with the authentic nature of employer-sponsored projects which allowed them to act in the role of consultant to the project. A project that provides authentic learning experience must exhibit the following characteristics: real world relevance, be ill-defined and the problem to be complex with competing solutions and diverse outcomes [9] [10] [11]. In this case the employer-sponsored projects did exhibit these characteristics. Finally the hot and humid weather in Malaysia were challenging for students who had arrived from the cold winter weather in Australia.

## DISCUSSION

One of the main benefits for students when participating in the international mobility program is gaining global and intercultural perspectives in addition to acquiring practical experiences in real life work situation. In this regards international mobility program, such as the one described in this paper, offers opportunity for students to gain new perspective in cross-cultural awareness. Research has shown that students desire to gain intercultural immersion when they participate in study abroad program. They prefer to have fun and adventure while abroad and to travel and see the world instead of developing academic competencies when they undertake study abroad program [18] [20] [21].

One of the lessons learned from this project is the cross-institutional collaboration between the home and host institutions. It is important to have a project champion in both institutions to foster collaboration to ensure the objective of the program and learning outcomes for students are achieved. Our experience shows that the cooperation from the host institution is critical to ensure the success of the mobility program. The host institution in this project has assisted in finding local accommodation and travel arrangements for the students and to secure employer-sponsored projects from local business

organizations. In addition the host institution provided custodian assistance to ensure students were able to settle and adapt to local environment as soon as possible and to maximize their learning experience in the host country in a relative short time.

It is also worth noting that administrative resources must be available to support international internship or mobility program [7]. Similarly, institutional support can strongly influence the effectiveness of the international mobility program [18]. Resources are required to establish cross-institutional agreement between the home and host institution or between the home institution and local business organizations in the host country. Administrative resources are also required to assist students with travel, accommodation and visa arrangement. Pre-departure information package or session must be organized to ensure students have sufficient information to prepare for the forthcoming international experience. A risk assessment must also be conducted to safeguard the health and safety of students when they travel to the host country.

Limitations to this study include relatively small sample size and reliance of self-report perceptions. Further research can be investigated on the motivation of IT students seeking international experience, and the barriers faced by students to participate in international work placement. Ahn [1] explains that potential employment opportunities can influence students' participations in international education. In this regard a follow up survey can be conducted to examine the career choice of this cohort of students to determine whether participation in the international mobility program such as the program described in this paper has consolidated student's intention in seeking international career.

## **CONCLUSION**

Findings of this exploratory study are consistent with the positive experience of students reported in other studies on international internships [2] [9]. The students gained valuable international experience and they have also benefited from using the skills learned in the course to enhance their work experience in the international setting. In addition students reported gaining new perspectives in terms of cross-cultural awareness. All students found the international mobility program to be valuable.

The labor market for IT employees has become increasingly globalized and it is vital for IT graduates to have an international awareness in order to be responsive to differences between countries, cultures, languages and organizational characteristics. Research has shown that students reported a high level of benefit from the study abroad experience in relation to graduate employment [14]. Thus it is hoped that by participating in an international mobility program, such as the program described in this paper, offers a valuable opportunity for students to gain first-hand international experience and to have an increased appreciation of global awareness and diversity. The funded opportunity provided by the government can remove financial barriers that may inhibit some students from participating in the international mobility program. Future research can be conducted to investigate barriers that may hinder students from undertaking international internship and mobility program.

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