INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES AND COLLABORATION: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This initial exploration into student perceptions and desired outcomes of international student exchanges and collaboration provides a snapshot in time of the thoughts on two small groups of students: Polish students studying in Chicago, IL in the US and Bosnian students using technology to interact with an American professor in the US. This paper can provide discussion prompts to address the specific interests of students for those academics involved student exchanges as well as those using technology to link students beyond geographic boarders.

Keywords - International student exchanges, virtual collaboration, internationalizing curriculum

1 INTRODUCTION

International exchanges have been a significant part of higher education for some time [1]. Although there has been some changes as a result of new visa requirements, the need and interest continues [2, 3]. The idea that through these exchanges the host institution can internationalize their curriculum, give local students an opportunity to interact with students from around the globe, and/or begin to change perceptions of Americans abroad are just a few of the reasons that international exchanges are an important part of the educational experience. International students gain through this academic experience, learning in a new environment, and there is considerable serendipitous learning, beyond the classroom, throughout any exchange [4].

However while these may be important reasons for pursuing international exchanges, what international students hope to gain from these experiences is not as well articulated in the list of benefits [4]. This paper preliminary case study in exchanges and collaboration will provide insights into what a small group of students from Poland and Bosnia gained and hope to gain from international exchanges. It should be noted that while the Polish students had the opportunity to study in the US for a year, the Bosnian students merely discussed topics of interest using technology. Their international exchanges were to countries more geographically close. This was due not only to specific exchange opportunities but also funding and visa restrictions. This conversation on student interest and desired outcomes for international exchanges and collaboration is just the first step.

Host institutions need to answer the question “what’s in it for us?” to invest the resources necessary to make these programs successful both for the host institution as well as for the international students who participate [5]. And, how can we attract the kind of students who will not only be engaged participants but will also act as ambassadors for the US once they return home [6]. Clearly international exchanges and collaboration can significantly expand learning opportunities for host country students, enriching classroom discussion providing a cross cultural view of topics and discussion questions. It can provide all students with the opportunity to learn about other cultures and
different perspectives through team and group classroom activities. And it can build relationships, beyond the individual to organizations that may lead to other exchanges, joint research and even grant and funding opportunities.

To make any international efforts successful the host institution must make significant commitment to the effort. Beyond the classroom, there needs to be dedicated staff to support international efforts. Coordinating the details of an exchange are important. Academic advising international students addresses the coursework and general academic issues; but work preparing faculty for the emergent issues of international students in their classes may require additional support.

The tangible “what's in it for us?” may not be obvious or appear to outweigh the investment to make it successful. Building relationships between and among students is not easy, and may not go beyond the classroom. Universities that don’t have a significant residential program have to work harder, creating other opportunities for student to interact, if they hope to have international students build relationships with host country students.

1.1 What is in it for us?

Clearly international exchanges and collaboration can significantly expand learning opportunities for host country students, enriching classroom discussion providing a cross cultural view of topics and discussion questions. It can provide all students with the opportunity to learn about other cultures and different perspectives through team and group classroom activities. International students who have had the opportunity to study in the US act as ambassadors, often dispelling perceptions created by the media [4, 5, 6]. And it can build relationships, beyond the individual to organizations that may lead to other exchanges, joint research and even grant and funding opportunities.

To make any international efforts successful the host institution must make significant commitment to the effort. Beyond the classroom, there needs to be dedicated staff to support international efforts. Coordinating the details of an exchange are important. Academic advising international students addresses the coursework and general academic issues; but work preparing faculty for the additional issues of international students in their classes may require additional support.

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As host universities create programs or units to address the needs of international students, or as programs explore the resources needed to assure international collaboration, the specific perceptions or desires of students are taken into consideration after the fact. What students hope to gain from international exchanges can change as a result of the actual experience.

For students who are unable to make the trip abroad, or to maintain relationships, using technology to support international collaboration is a poor substitute but does provide some access to the cross cultural communication and insights. Again this collaboration can provide basic information and experiences, but how it can be used to support local educational and professional opportunities is unclear.

The Wasie Scholars, Ms. Kinga Ogonowska and Ms. Agata Kubis spent a year studying management in Chicago at National-Louis University, earned this opportunity through a competitive process offered to students at the WSB-NLU, a private college in Nowy Sacz Poland. The Bosnian students who participated in the virtual collaboration participated as a result of the previous work of this author as a Fulbright Teaching Scholar in Bosnia. Under the direction of Mr. Dzenan Kulovic the Bosnian students self selected after hearing of the opportunity while they also enrolled in a degree program from the University of Zenica.

This initial conversation about student perspective related to international exchanges and collaboration will inform future work at National-Louis University. It is hoped that it will be the bases of future collaboration and ultimately exchanges of both students and faculty.
1.2 What Holds us Back?

For some schools, both in the US and abroad, the curriculum is so tightly articulated and rigidly scheduled that it is difficult to make adjustments to include additional courses or topics that might be represented in study abroad experiences. Differences in yearly schedules, degree requirements from both college (faculty) as well as program specific requirements, and individual professor or advisor preconceptions of the international exchange or collaboration can influence student decisions and even discourage them from applying. Beyond this is the cost of any exchange, not only the cost of tuition and living abroad, but also the cost of applying, can be prohibitive for some. In some countries visas are difficult to obtain or the time it takes to apply, as well as the logistics of applying for a visa can deter students.

Competing academic responsibilities of faculty may influence their interest and ability to participate and support international student exchanges. Balancing teaching, research and service requirements can leave little time for supporting these exchange programs. When responsibility for international students is added on to an already full academic load, it is unlikely that the program will receive the attention it requires.

Countries actively engaged in the Bologna Process are working toward greater mobility but the process is slow [4, 8]. And, even if the university makes a commitment to the Process, sharing the commitment at all levels of the university is often very difficult. Transferability of course work can make the exchange even more expensive, time and money, as missed course is made up and courses taken abroad receive different credit at the home institution.

Beyond the classroom and the academic pursuits of students, the social and community life requires attention prior to inviting students. Identifying suitable living arrangement, addressing transportation and health care requirements are important. But also addressing how to link students to a peer group, integrate them into the calendar of events and holidays in meaningful ways, address inequities so visiting students feel able to engage with their peers, all require considerable thought and expense. Dealing with particular interests as well as attending to the unexpected can be a daunting task for universities who don’t have a history of exchanges and collaboration.

1.3 Student Perceptions

Polish Exchange Students

According to Ms. Ogonowska the exchange program provided her with a priceless experience that affected her in many ways. It broadened her mind, enriching her both academically and personally. She learned discipline specific content, more about American culture as well as corporate culture, but she also learned more about herself than she anticipated. It stimulated her interests to consider new options and dreams for the future. Ms. Kubis found that spending one year in the US enriched her culturally, academically and personally more than she ever expected. She improved language skills and through course work and internships, practiced business English skills at work. She learned to ask more questions in class, to discuss academic problems with professors and fellow students.

Both women first took a course on Career Assessment and Development course which provided personalized assessment to help identify strengths and areas for further development. This really provided the grounding for much of the course work and professional/personal development that followed.

The move to a metropolitan city from a small town and a small village was a challenge, and forced each student to interact and work with people from different cultures and backgrounds. From these new opportunities they felt more confident in their ability to take on new challenges. Ms. Kubis’ independence increased as she traveled throughout the US. She went to New York for Christmas holidays and to Los Angeles for summer holidays. Chicago, New York and Los Angeles cities reinforced her openness for diversity, allowing her to feel more mature and to become more flexible. Travelling helped her gain self-awareness and a broader understanding of international relations. All this travel and interaction with a more diverse population helped Ms. Kubis become a risk-taking person.

The diversity experienced as a result of the exchange provided an opportunity to routinely experience the complexity and joy of living and working in a multicultural country. In a homogeneous country like
Poland, it is not often that residents have the opportunity to work or study with people who are openly different from you. Diversity was a bit overwhelming at first. In no time students found working with people of different ages, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientation, or levels of physical ability truly enriching. This experience helped them become more tolerant and more careful with judgments.

Studying in the US was quite different from studying in Poland. In Chicago the Polish students studied with working adults in a program directed toward adult learners (the focus of the College of Management and Business of NLU). Initially both found it challenging to take classes with people who had much experience and previous knowledge to share. The age gap was a bit intimidating but overtime they found age was not a factor. This sort of self directed learning style served them well in the long run, expanding the possibilities as they learned much from fellow students as well as professors. The class projects were “real life” tasks in which all could participate, giving more experience in applying concepts than commonly done at the university in Poland. Studying with working adults focused on learning more from the real life examples than from formulas. Ms’s. Kubis and Ogonowska found that teachers used coaching and facilitating styles rather than the more traditional teaching styles used in Poland. Discussions and projects were used to assess learning so there was no “studying” for a test. Ongoing communication with team members, research, writing, work and reworking of projects allowed students to integrate knowledge and begin to apply it, considering multiple situations and applications based on the make up of the team. The integration of technology into face to face courses, as well as totally online courses, was also new, but expanded opportunities for communicating, studying, and learning.

The relationship between students and professors was also different. In Poland interactions between professors and students are quite formal according to our Polish students, while in Chicago their experience was much more informal. In some cases calling professors by first name was difficult at first but they found this facilitated having a more direct relationship that in the end supported more comfort with inquiry and discourse. This interaction with professors inspired them to push harder and to dig a bit deeper.

As her confidence grew Ms. Kubis decided to take on more responsibility and to participate in additional internships. First, in the Cook County (in the state of Illinois) Treasurer’s Office, where she became part of a large bureaucracy and learned about institutionalized public administration affairs. She found this to be a fossilized system. In her third internship at Beazley Company; the insurance company that manages a few of the Lloyd’s Company syndicates, she found a modern effective system. The contrast between the two made a significant impression on her and reinforced much of her coursework.

There is much learning that takes place beyond the classroom. Ms. Kubis earned money, from the paid internships, and as a result was able to travel. This independence and ability to make decisions was very different from her life in Poland. Her travel experiences took her to traditional tourist sites like the Grand Canyon, but also to small lakes and towns in northern Wisconsin. She did things she had never done before, Halloween parties, family Thanksgiving dinners, household projects like tiling a floor, dog sitting. “Exchange programs gave me the chance to see what Halloween was. I loved the warm atmosphere of the American family celebrating Thanksgiving. You can’t learn these things from book,” says Ms. Kubis.

A year away from home, with such life expanding changes, can make returning home difficult. And in fact the adjustment to home can be as difficult as the initial exchange. After her year abroad Ms. Kubis’ approach to the life is much worldlier as a result of the experiences and relationships. Friends and family noticed her self-confidence and willingness to make changes in the world. From this experience Ms. Ogonowska and Ms. Kubis both felt they have been able to extend personal and professional networks, identifying mentoring relationships that will support ongoing growth.

Bosnian Students Participating in Virtual Collaboration

The Bosnian students participated in a virtual conversation with Dr. Ellen McMahon, who was a Fulbright Teaching Scholar at the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Economics 2005-2006. Her continued collaboration with one of her students, Mr. Dzenan Kulovic, and subsequent visit and presentation at the newly created academic program in Travnik BiH, evolved into work with enrolled undergraduate students. Through blogs, texting and email correspondence with a varied number of participants students talked about their academic and professional aspirations. They were most concerned with how this sort of collaboration might support future academic or professional work. This
very preliminary but engaging correspondence focused on leadership and management concepts, as
well as discussions on professional development opportunities.

According to Mr. Kulovic by introducing the Bologna Process demonstrates Bosnia and Herzegovina
commitment to change and a more interactive and collaborative higher educational system [8]. As a
result of the acceptance of the Bologna Process higher education as a whole needed to be rethought.
This means that not only are there structural and policy changes but also faculty (professors) and
students must rethink their roles. Student are more actively participating in their education. As more
professors become comfortable with the shifts in their role, from the lecturing imparting knowledge, to
the professor who engages students to interact with the subject matter through discussion groups,
simulations, case studies and role playing, students must also face the challenges of moving from
passive participants to active learners. This shift is not easy for the institution as a whole and for
faculty and students. Professors, or the associates working with the professor, must create an
environment that is safe enough to express ideas and opinions and feedback can be freely given and
integrated into the learning process.

Mr. Kulovic states that technology has helped in this process, not only allowing students access to
information that they previously did not have, but also connecting them to other universities,
professors and students. These new relationships, with people and technology, allow students to build
their communication, critical thinking and research skills.

By exchanging information with colleagues outside of the country students:

- Get to know the culture of another country;
- Learn ways of studying and study programmes;
- Build firm friendships;
- Exchange information that is not mutually available;
- Learn from the experiences of others;
- Exchange books, references, and ideas;
- Practice language skills, both oral and written;
- Collaboration with others allows students to:
  - Explore new ideas and make comparisons of the conditions in the countries;
  - Execute scientific conclusions and give recommendations;
  - Participate in conferences and mutually execute works.
  - Encourage students to pursue studies abroad with the idea of returning home to share
    their experiences and lessons learned.

By opening boarders and allowing students to meet with, virtually speaking, with peers and professors
from abroad, these student can then encourage their own professors to more actively engage students
in their home classrooms. Sharing resources and connections with faculty can encourage them to be
more open to the changes recommended by the Bologna Process.

In fact the responsibility for opening the classroom to more active learning processes is not as simple
as just following the guidelines of the Bologna Process. Resources to revamp the educational system
compete with other equally pressing country priorities. Many faculty do not have the language skills or
expertise to make connections, identify funding opportunities, and create international relationships
without significant assistance. In a depressed economic environment, faculty are stretched very thin
as they try to address the university responsibilities of teaching, service, and publication, as well as
make a living wage. Focus on a more engaged and interactive learning experience takes a back seat
to the realities of economic environment.

According to one student participant, Bosnian students are quite specific and focused on finishing
school and finding a job. There are very few students who are able to participate in any form of
exchange of even collaboration due to this focus on speed to completion of education and immediate
employment. There are very high barriers to participation in these sorts of activies. Visa restrictions
and the complications of gaining a visa make exchanges very difficult. Funding is another very
significant barrier to any exchange. Even short term exchanges require visas and substantial funding
so they are also unlikely.
While there are many barriers to participating in exchanges, this student summarizing the thoughts of his colleagues says there are many “invisible” benefits to exchanges and even virtual collaboration. The creation of a virtual network of resources beyond your borders can assist when the actual opportunity for travel arises. Online forums can be a first step in this process, once language and technology issues are addressed. Those students participating in the virtual collaboration felt that “talking” to foreign professors or addressing management topics of interest are valuable as participants can practice language and critical thinking skills. These virtual communication options provide an opportunity to learn other perspectives on a topics, become familiar with current best practices, practice engaging in conversations with divergent opinions and create connections building an understanding of the current situation on both sides of the conversation. Students hope that this reference to some international collaboration, either face to face or virtual, can be leveraged to improve job opportunities.

International experience is important to employers, according to our Bosnian students, but there is also a potential “negative connotation”. Given the economic situation in the country there are very few families who can afford to send their children to study abroad or to send their children to private universities to earn an international diploma. For those students who do not have this privilege they feel they are at a distinct disadvantage. Some students think that this privilege does not mean they are the best person for the job. So while as a whole the students who participated in the collaborative effort thought international experience was important and beneficial to finding a good job, they were also ambivalent about this fact.

Students also thought it would be important to see how this virtual collaboration could be used to their advantage to support their job prospects.

The difficulties in this collaboration, as voiced by students, is the time and timing factor. With the rigors of the academic schedule and the availability of free time, finding the time to read and write, it should be noted in another language, makes regular participation difficult. Given that this is an independent activity not linked to any coursework or assignment also increases the work load while not linking it to any particular recognized educational outcome. The timing issue is grounded in differing schedules. Exam schedules are quite different in Bosnia from NLU. In the Management and Business programs at NLU the use of comprehensive exams to assess knowledge is not as common as the only assessment. The use of case studies, simulations, presentations and individual and team projects are more extensively and easily used based on class size and a commitment to applied learning.

The Bosnian economic situation and job market are significant variables in this situation. While it is possible that having some international collaborative relationship with a professor and students outside Bosnia is valuable, the time and energy it takes to engage in such may not be seen as cost effective. Since this is not, or has not to date, been linked to any academic requirement, students are ambivalent about the work involved and what they may or may not get from this relationship.

Conclusions

From my experience I have learned that studying abroad stands for magnificent personal and professional growth opportunities. The value of exchanges cannot be underestimated. The experience earned abroad cannot be exchanged for anything else or acquired in our homelands. The perspective on global affairs we gain when going outside of our motherland is indescribable. When we leave our countries and go away from the world as we know it, we are exposed to numerous development-stimulating experiences. To my mind leaving our homelands, where our comfort zone is, is essential for preparing the younger generations for solving the problems of the today’s globalized world. Kinga Ogonowska

While this conversation with a small group of student participating in international work in various ways is very limited, it does speak to what would make exchanges and collaboration better from a student perspective. Building interaction between and among students, both host country students and international students was seen as important by everyone. Even “speaking” with American students via technology was seen as an important part of any international collaboration by those students using technology. Learning about different cultures, practicing language skills, and ultimately conducting joint research or writing activities are seen as important to students.
The Polish exchange students enjoyed and learned from studying with adult students, but they did miss the opportunity that school and study has in building relationships with students their own age. Being part of a “commuter” school also made making friends more difficult, as there was no residential component to foster friendship and shared activities. NLU is a school which does not have a residential campus and offers management students weekly evening sessions; there are very few day classes and no extra curricular activities. There are no collaborative relationships with neighboring universities. As a result, there were no after school collaboration in students organizations and no chance to meet students from the other universities. This placed too much responsibility on the individual student who in fact was unfamiliar with the broader community. The exchange students learned many things, and that should not be discounted. But, relationships with American students their own age, sharing ideas about what concerns traditional American undergraduate students, and socializing in informal settings like residence halls was not part of the experience and was missed.

Both exchange and virtual collaboration students spoke of the importance of learning about American business practices. While Ms. Kubis took advantage of additional internships and created several opportunities for herself through travel, Ms. Ogonowska felt in retrospect she might have benefited from additional internships or even volunteer activities in the community.

The Polish exchange students spoke of the difficulty of re-entry into their home environments. Once they experienced such rich diversity and built relationships with people who were different from their previous interactions, they found it upsetting that people at home still kept their previously held opinions. The fact that the exchange students had had such life changing experiences made it impossible to return to previously held beliefs and equally difficult to condone such beliefs. Providing some sort of orientation about what to expect once they returned they thought would be very helpful.

As we move forward formalizing virtual collaboration to better leverage the opportunity (link to class, have routine SKYPE conversations, work toward a joint project, bring in guest speakers, etc.) would benefit students on both sides of the exchange. The possibility of offering a joint class, with both synchronous and asynchronous elements, again would allow students to share experiences from their own life and community. This might also lead to collaboration between faculty leading to sharing research interests.

One of the big factors is funding, identifying a funding source to conduct exchanges, bringing students both to the US and taking US students abroad would enrich all those involved. But finding smaller amounts of money to defray the costs of a jointly offered online course would be a good first step. Formalizing re-entry or debriefing programs for those students who participate in exchanges is important. Experience without the opportunity to integrate lessons learned remains only experience. It is important to begin to reflect on learning to see how it can be applied in other settings. Funds to support presentation and publication efforts would demonstrate the importance of international collaboration. Allowing students to have the opportunity to present their thoughts and findings reinforces the importance of the activities.

But institutions can take the first step. They can support individual faculty efforts to build relationships and international connections. Designing curriculum to allow for international collaboration as part of a course or program of study sends a clear message of the importance of the activity. Allowing these efforts to become an integrated part of faculty role, paying faculty with time or money, creating space for conversations and activities within a routine schedule send the message that international collaboration is important.

Creating an exceptional educational experience that prepares our students for life in this global environment, where technology makes the world smaller and smaller, where we can be more mobile than previous generations, and where the speed with which knowledge is created increases exponentially, it is our responsibility to listen to our students and provide as much exposure to the world around as possible.
References


