

# ***Hitting the Ground Running: The Impact of A Pre-Departure Class on Study Abroad Participants***

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The first day of class in London three years ago, a group of students participating in our business—focused study abroad program did not know the answer to the British professor's basic questions about the European Union, the region's geography or the Euro. Our professor who was observing the class was appalled. We had conducted a mandatory orientation program in the U.S. prior to departure that addressed general study abroad issues such as health, safety and credit transfer. However, this orientation only prepared students for the mechanics of studying abroad; it did not increase their global awareness. We were troubled; if students at one site weren't fully prepared for life abroad, chances are it was also a problem at other sites. So we created a mandatory one—credit course for all outbound students called **International Perspectives**.

The overall course objectives were threefold: first, to provide students with general background on international business and current events; second, to provide students with knowledge specific to their host country; finally, to give students the tools necessary to adapt to a culture different from their own. We recently completed the third semester of the course and are preparing for the fourth.

International Perspectives includes orientation, peer advising, panels, regional briefings and culture shock preparation. It meets weekly during the second half of each semester in two hour blocks. Students are assessed in the following ways:

- Four weekly reports on news articles about the host country.
- Four country briefings, which pose questions about history and politics; education; daily life and culture; economics, the environment and population.
- A final paper summarizing what was gained from the class and detailing what the student will continue to investigate.

Initially, students were less than enthusiastic about International Perspectives, but in the end, they appreciated the course. The final evaluations were filled with begrudging comments like "I expected this to be a waste of time, but I have to admit that I learned a lot."

In general, students considered the independent work the most beneficial. In addition to learning about the issue at hand, students acquired habits and supplemental information they later deemed essential. As a result of the article summaries, students acquired the habit of reading a newspaper or online news source daily. While researching the country briefings' required (and oft-considered boring) questions, students came upon topics they found more interesting. One student researched his genealogy on his own; another was captivated by the story behind the Mexican flag.

We adapt the course each semester based on what we learn along the way. The quality of the article summaries varied tremendously, and reading them inspired changes to the curriculum. Several students exceeded expectations by referencing more than one article for a single assignment or by following a single theme for all four summaries, like one savvy student who focused his independent work on London's club industry, as he aspires to a career in entertainment. But not all summaries were top quality. Some students obviously found an article—often of dubious relevance—at the last moment and restated minute details simply to meet the one page length requirement. I struggled to ascertain the relevance of Madonna's first internet broadcast concert (from London) or weekly updates on the surgical separation of twin babies (in England) to an undergraduate's preparation for study abroad. Our syllabus now suggests that students use assignments either to gain a broad-based understanding of the region or to focus on a particular topic of interest, and it also requires students to discuss the relevance of the topic in addition to summarizing the article.

While many of the students found the country briefing assignments tedious, they ultimately realized that by completing the briefings, they learned basic information about the host country. Working on the briefings raised practical matters that students had not previously considered, including tipping, weather and public transportation. A wildly popular feature of the class was interviewing students from the host country, a requirement for completing several briefings. Students were astounded by what they learned,

and many expressed that the impending study abroad experience felt “real” and concrete for the first time. In several cases, the interview spawned new friendships.

Before International Perspectives, orientation included only a cursory overview of culture shock. However, the new course’s cultural sensitivity training was profoundly influential. Many students assumed they would easily adapt to the new culture, either because of personal attributes or because of their destination. As one student said, “England isn’t that much different than here.” The presenter’s visual aids, stories of international students in the U.S. and personal experiences as a British national living abroad gave a realistic and personalized look at culture shock. The session struck a chord. One student wrote shortly after arriving in Hong Kong, “At first I was basically overwhelmed, but after only a single day I feel like I am starting to get settled in. The people here are incredibly nice and I’m having a great time already. I think that I might be in the ‘honeymoon stage’ according to our International Perspectives class.”

Although International Perspectives has successfully prepared our students for the transition to studying abroad, some problems with course design remain. The greatest challenges are keeping the course relevant to all members of a group whose interests span 13 countries on three continents and providing an overview of worldwide current events. We invited three guest speakers to each provide a 45 minute summary of the economic and political events that shape Asia, Latin America or Western Europe, the regions where we send students. Admittedly, this was a tall order. The lectures were met with mixed reviews, as some students found the material too basic, while for others it was too focused. Far too many students complained about being briefed on a location far from where they would study. We struggle with how to instill the worth of learning about issues happening around the world, and not just in the country of interest. In the future, we will more carefully explain why the lectures are important.

The final paper was a tool for students to reflect upon what they had learned in International Perspectives and to provide focus for final preparations. Students cited the value of specific lectures or assignments, often stating that a topic they once considered amorphous had suddenly become very relevant. One Spain-bound student wrote about her increased understanding of the Basque separatist movement, and implications for her life while in Madrid. A student headed for Singapore not only learned about laws and punishment there, but also the influence

they might have on a society. We may consider collecting the final paper after the study abroad program ends, which will allow students to report both on the value of the overseas experience and the impact of the class.

Our students are not the only ones who have benefited from International Perspectives. Our partner universities have told us, anecdotally, that they appreciate hosting students who are better prepared for living in the host city and adapting to a new culture, and who also can adjust to different academic expectations. I also benefited a great deal from International Perspectives. Given that most students e-mail me for information rather than stop by my office, it was enlightening to see students on a weekly basis. I was constantly reminded of the value of international education and the exciting journey the students were embarking upon. I have used the feedback from our host partners to refine the course and improve our site-specific handbooks.

International Perspectives has proved to be a valuable asset to our curriculum. Our overseas partners host students who have an increased global perspective. My office has improved its services. Outbound students now think about the host country months in advance of the program and are thus better prepared for studying and living abroad. Students view International Perspectives as a bonus: they make preparations they knew they should be doing, but might not otherwise have done. And now students can speak with confidence about the European Union on their first day of class in London.