

# **Operations Management Through Study Abroad: Approach, Evaluation, and Insights for Application**

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the development of a novel approach to teaching operations management (OM) topics through experiential learning with a study abroad course going to France, Germany, and Spain, in which students engaged in company visits and other learning activities. Content analysis of self-reflection included in final reports indicated that students incorporated concept applications from multiple areas of OM in their reports. Assessment of student evaluations indicated that, in comparison with students taking the same course in a traditional on-campus format, students believed that they learned significantly more from this course as compared to other courses on the focal campus. The program responds to critiques posed by authors who suggest the superficiality of some study abroad programs and incorporates novel approaches to engage student appreciation of the implications and context of OM topics. Activities for engaging similar exposure to topics in the traditional on-campus OM classroom are presented.

**Keywords:** operations management, study abroad, experiential learning.

## **1. Introduction**

Experiential and active learning processes have increased in their adoption by colleges of business as they seek to develop individuals capable of functioning effectively in globally competitive business settings. Harsell and O'Neill (2010) have defined experiential learning as the process of "learning by doing". Experiential learning has been applied through such educational approaches as internships (cf. Dillon, McCaskey, & Blazer 2011), consulting projects (Maskulka, Stout, & Massad 2011), student-run businesses (Tompkins & Schlesinger 2010), and short-term faculty led study abroad programming (Tuleja 2008, Loro 2009). The commonly accepted advantage of experiential learning processes is that students, by means of being actively involved in the context of the business concepts under study (whether the workplace in an internship, the company setting for a consulting project, the

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actual shop floor, or the running of a firm whether virtually through simulation or actually through student-run firms) will more fully appreciate not only the key concepts being considered, but also the fit of these concepts with others that they are learning. The benefits of this learning is clear in that it delivers on stakeholder-valued competencies such as analytical thinking, people and task management, and self-management (Maskulka *et al.* 2011). Furthermore, AACSB International recognizes both the need for student engagement in the learning process as well as the need for diversity and global awareness as a part of the business curriculum of accredited institutions (AACSB International 2012). Experiential learning in the global environment is also helpful in raising awareness of business practices, intercultural management differences, and institutional environments within which business practices occur.

Such experiential learning practice requires in-depth and focused seminars on campus, field experiences in the local or regional community, or the participation in study or travel abroad programs. According to Open Doors (Institute for International Education 2013), the number of U.S. students studying abroad increased 3.4% in 2011-2012 to reach 283,322 students. In 2011/12, according to Open Doors, 1.4% of all US university students studied abroad, of which 58.9% studied abroad for short-term programs of 8 weeks or less in duration (Institute for International Education 2013). The goal of internationalization is present in many universities' stated plans, though separating the rhetoric of its benefits from its real outcomes is sometimes challenging (Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis 2012).

There are many specific benefits associated with study abroad program participation, such as enhanced personal skills, sustained greater interest in further study, and intercultural competence and employability (Nunan 2006). Sutton and Rubin (2004) found that in matched samples of students who had studied abroad versus those who had not, the following differences researchers attributed to study abroad: higher functional knowledge, greater knowledge of global interdependence, greater knowledge of cultural relativism, greater knowledge of world geography, and greater cultural sensitivity. Yet Sutton and Rubin (2004) find no significant differences between study abroad participants and their peers on interpersonal accommodation and verbal acumen. However, Feinberg (2002) noted that U.S. students tend to be able to learn about themselves on study abroad programs, but doubted that they learned much about other areas. Van de Berg (2007) noted the criticality of intervening at pre-departure, intra-experience, and post-return to generate optimal learning benefits for students on study abroad programs.

One area in which experiential learning activities appear to have been limited is that of Operations Management (OM). Polito, Kros, and Watson (2004) tested OM concept recognition via the use of the Zarco manufacturing experiential learning activity. Fish (2008) reported on graduate students' application of OM processes to their employers. Bardati (2006) reported on

the use of the campus environmental audit as an operations planning tool. Only Simpson and Hancock (2011) had explicitly utilized experiential learning and digital technologies to connect students between countries to co-teach OM topics. The current program extends the knowledge base about the opportunities to apply OM course principles in a study abroad experiential learning setting, and also identifies some teaching applications to incorporate some of those experiential applications gleaned through the study abroad experience to enhance the traditional classroom setting.

## **2. Experiential Learning in an OM Course Through Study Abroad**

The present program developed as an extension of an existing study abroad program called Business in Europe that had been in existence for 11 years at a medium-sized AACSB accredited college of business in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of that study abroad program was to expose students to the economic, socio-cultural, and political-legal environments of the countries of France, Germany, and Spain with an emphasis on how business practices differ from those used by companies in the United States. The addition of the OM course to Business in Europe study abroad program in May 2012 was targeted for several reasons: (1) it was a required course for graduation for all Bachelor of Science in Business Administration majors, thus creating a large potential market; (2) it fit well with the range of activities generally conceptualized on the program; and (3) it had been tested in a study abroad program in a new study abroad program in a previous year and found to have tremendous opportunities for application, study, observation, and dialogue about OM issues. Student response to this course has been very positive, and the OM program has been offered again in 2013 and 2014 and is planned for 2015. It has become a core offering of the May study abroad program with student interest coming long before recruitment formally opens for the program.

In addition, it is clear that aspects and key concepts of OM are present in many ways within the development and management of a study abroad program because attributes of project management are applied to the program from its basic conceptualization. Each study abroad program is essentially a new project, each with its own start and target finish dates, scope in terms of travel areas, time at each destination or step and size of class. Even if the trip has been completed in a past school session, the dates, airline, environment, housing options are different, and student groups are different. Process issues are applied in the order and time allowed at each country destination, business or event to visit. Scheduling issues are addressed in mode of transportation and its availability (publicly scheduled transport), capacity of chosen transport and business operating hours. Queuing issues arise in moving a group through