

Global Business in a Digital World: Short-term Study Abroad in Emerging Economies

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Global Business in a Digital World is a short-term study abroad program developed at the University of Richmond to enhance learning opportunities primarily targeted to business students but includes students majoring in a variety of disciplines. Curriculum integration across business functions and other academic disciplines is a major goal of the program. Collaboration technologies and social media tools are used in the learning process to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities these technologies may offer for communication, collaboration, and work flows across borders. Students learn about the challenges and opportunities of doing business in other parts of the world as well as ways in which technology plays a major role in bringing the world closer together.

The Internet paved the way for globalization and the new world order as it is unfolding today. Collaboration technologies and social media provide still another dimension to understanding and interacting with cultures around the world. As students experiment with these technologies in other countries, they have an enhanced understanding of the value and possibilities these technologies provide companies. In addition, they better understand how these technologies can enhance decision making across borders. The focus of the program is on emerging economies since these countries represent the growth areas and potential opportunities for businesses over the next several decades. The BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) represent some of the greatest short-term opportunities, while parts of the Middle East and Africa are emerging as areas of great interest for countries

and companies in the future (Zakaria, 2008). Firsthand experiences in these countries give students an awareness and understanding of the implications of the global economy and its impact on future business. Students today who want to progress in their careers and provide added value to companies will need international experience and a global mindset to navigate this new landscape.

Course Design

Connecting business, technology, and people worldwide is the central theme for this series of courses. A full credit course is developed for each country to be studied. Although the program is in the initial stages of development, courses have been implemented for China (May 2009 and 2010) and the Middle East (December 2008 and 2009). Approximately 10 students participated in each of these courses for a total of 40 students completing either the China or Middle East class. It is expected that the number of students per course will increase as additional funding is secured to make this possible. Each course has a semester component that is supplemented by a two-week study abroad in the country. During the semester students are exposed to lectures from experts in language, history, art, literature, geography, culture, anthropology, and law. Students also study international business issues and economic trends through classroom cases and lectures by company executives in the U.S. While in the country students visit companies and hear executives speak from both local and multinational companies. They also attend lectures by local university faculty in schools in the country. Students are provided with numerous online sources



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of information. They are expected to read articles, books, and newspapers as appropriate. A comprehensive project individualized to each student's needs and interests is an additional requirement of the course. Participants are responsible for the majority of the costs, but the university does provide a supplement to help students offset some of the expenses. Corporate sponsorships and other donations are being solicited to provide long-term resources to support the program as it develops to include additional countries and opportunities. Initially the program is targeted for undergraduates, but it can be expanded to MBA and executive programs.

Major Objectives of the Program

The major objectives include the following:

- Provide a short-term study abroad opportunity for students who may not have any other opportunity for an international experience.
- Integrate curriculum initiatives across the business functions and liberal arts.
- Incorporate global communications and related technology experiences into the study-abroad learning experience.
- Through a supervised comprehensive project, provide a learning experience that gives students knowledge of opportunities and obstacles associated with doing business in other countries and in making global business decisions.
- Provide international opportunities in areas of the world currently underrepresented in the offerings for business students (Asia, The Middle East, and Africa).
- Better meet the demands of the current business environment and the business community hiring graduates.
- Incorporate experiential learning activities into the business school curriculum.

- Provide a firsthand perspective from executives of local and multinational companies operating in a given part of the world and an appreciation of the political, legal, regulatory, cultural, and economic issues that impact business operations in other countries.

International Content

The course content reflects the growing influence of emerging economies on global business. For the China course, students visit companies and participate in cultural activities in Shanghai, Beijing, Dalian, Xian, Hong Kong, and Macau. This gives the students an array of experiences and a framework for comparison across cities. Students study business in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Bahrain as part of the Middle East class. They attend university lectures and visit financial institutions to learn about trends in financial markets around the world.

The Middle East has been ignored in most business school curriculums and Asia has only recently become a focus of study abroad for business students. The Middle East is becoming an important area for business given the importance of oil and gas in these regions and the emergence of the Gulf region as a more significant gateway for trade between Asia and Europe. The role of Islam in shaping business practices and an understanding of Islamic finance are examples of areas in which students explore in the class. A concentration in Middle Eastern studies has recently been implemented as part of the international education strategy for the university. Resources have been allocated for faculty to teach the Arabic language and to support development of curriculum for this concentration. This short-term study-abroad course focusing on business practices adds an offering in support of this concentration. The business aspect provides a unique component and different perspective for traditional liberal arts students.

The focus on Asia and particularly China and India has become more important for business in recent years with the emergence of offshoring and outsourcing in these countries (Meredith, 2006). Much of the innovation for companies in the

future will be directed to consumers in the developing world in those countries with an emerging middle class that now has money to spend on new products (Pralhad, 2006). Technology will play a major role in developing innovations that address unique needs of consumers in these countries. Innovation in technology will be key to reaching this part of the world population now referred to as the 86% market (Mahajan & Banga, 2006). For example, it is interesting to observe people with no electricity use cell phones they charge at a local store. Students begin to see the potential for innovation in these developing markets.

Technology Components: Collaboration, Communication, and Social Media

Students get hands-on experience using technologies in the country they visit. These include wikis, blogs, podcasts, twitter, RSS feeds, Skype, mash-ups, social networks (Facebook), virtual worlds (second life), wireless technologies, video conferencing, electronic meetings, and other social content applications. Specific exercises are incorporated through both collaborative team projects and individual assignments. Faculty across disciplines (e.g., economics, marketing, finance, geography) serve as advisors to students on their projects for the class.

The explosion of new Web 2.0 technologies and Enterprise 2.0 applications have provided opportunities for businesses to integrate these technologies into their marketing campaigns, project management, and manufacturing operations worldwide (McAfee, 2009; Li & Bernoff, 2008). An array of language, cultural, legal, regulatory, political, and economic issues may become significant as companies utilize these technologies in settings outside of the U.S. At the same time, these technologies are bringing the world closer together and will provide competitive advantage to those who utilize these technologies effectively. There is also potential for cost savings for companies who use the technologies to address issues such as replacing travel with electronic meetings. Firsthand

experience with these technologies in a particular country provide students with a better understanding of how these technologies may pose obstacles for company strategies while at the same time provide advantages for companies who know how to utilize the technologies effectively.

The following communications and social media technologies are used in the courses.

A **Wiki** is used as the backbone textbook for the class and as a collaboration tool. The material is developed through student research. During the study-abroad experience the students are required to write a collaborative journal of their experiences and include links to important information, photos, and discussion threads. The wiki is password-protected, but the parents of students and others at the university have access to the content so that they can read about the adventures of the students while they are participating in the activities of the trip.

Podcasts are used to record important lectures and speaker presentations. Video podcasts are also used for professor lectures and important information. Students are required to subscribe to podcasts provided by companies such as Gartner, a leading IT research firm. In addition, students record podcasts of chapter summaries of some of the books they are reading. They can share the workload of reading a book and listen to the other summaries on their iPod while walking or exercising. Podcasts are posted to the wiki.

Blogs are used for discussion of major topics and to express opinions on issues and current events. Students take on specific roles or topics for their participation on the blog. Students from universities in the country being visited also participate, which gives different viewpoints and enhances the global communication experience for the students.

Micro-blogs (Twitter) are used for short clips to remind students of upcoming activities or notify them spontaneously of a change in plans or other events. This is a good way to track students while on the trip. Others can keep track of fellow students and everyone's

schedule. If someone is lost, it is a way to get in touch quickly. Of course, students must frequently update their status for this to be effective. It also requires access to a cell phone or Internet, which can be a problem at times in other countries.

Mash-ups are used for applications that students may find helpful in the context of this class. There are thousands of these available for students to research.

YouTube is used as a means for recording short videos and posting these for those back in the U.S. to see in real time. For some activities it is the only means for capturing the content.

RSS (really simple syndication) is used to get feeds of relevant information and organize the information related to the course content.

Virtual worlds (Second Life) are used as the platform to experiment with a class exercise that includes students from both countries.

Electronic meetings (Breeze) are used to conduct workshops across borders with students in both countries.

Video conferencing brings in speakers from other countries to the classroom in the U.S. Time differences pose some issues, but careful scheduling takes care of most of these problems.

Other technologies are used as appropriate. Wireless technologies, cell phone usage in other countries, and Internet access and usage are part of the experience. Students can contemplate how companies might design their collaboration and social media strategies to meet the needs of their international operations.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of this approach and specific benefits were more substantial than anticipated. All of our main objectives were met. Most of the students participating in the program did so because they did not have other opportunities to study abroad. Diversity in student participation was encouraged and actively pursued. Curriculum integration was a major accomplishment both in terms of course content and faculty involvement. The student projects were exceptional because of the enthusiasm and motivation

that was developed from the time spent in the country. Students learned firsthand about the obstacles and frustrations of using technologies in other parts of the world. In some cases they were surprised by the technological advancements. Most of the developing world utilize cell phone technology and Internet access, and its use is increasing rapidly. This opportunity gives students expertise that is recognized as valuable by the business community. Several students anticipate applying for jobs in places outside the U.S. These trends represent a paradigm shift in the way students view their future career opportunities and also reflect current hiring strategies of companies. Curriculum initiatives such as these short-term study abroad opportunities give students the added value necessary for competing in the global labor market of the future.

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