

Mind the gap: Canadian students' experience of a one-semester study abroad at a Francophone Belgian university (0135)

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Abstract:

This paper presents findings and implications of small-scale pilot study of the experiences of Canadian university students during a one-semester study abroad at a large Francophone university in Belgium (2014-2015). This study aimed to uncover the students' motivations in choosing this particular institution, as well as insights into their academic and social experiences prior to and during their semester abroad. Using e-surveys as well as follow-up e-mail exchanges with students, findings raise important questions regarding: 1) how Canadian universities prepare their students for a semester of study abroad; 2) the complexities of navigating two university systems with overlapping academic calendars; 3) anticipating academic support services for visiting students by the host university; and 4) transparency regarding differences in academic traditions and cultures. The significance of this study is related to the increased intercontinental mobility of students for study abroad experiences and the challenges related to alignment gaps between educational systems.

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This paper presentation aligns itself with SRHE's themes of convergence, as well as national and international perspectives, with an aim to assess, evaluate and understand contexts relating to the experience of students who study abroad for one or two semesters, in order to improve institutional policy and practices of home and host institutions.

The implementation of the Bologna Accord increased and facilitated student mobility across the European Union. The Erasmus programme is well established across Europe. In Canada, on the other hand, although university students have long been able access study abroad opportunities, these are not coordinated under a scheme such as Erasmus+, nor are they taken up in the same numbers as European students. This paper reports on a collaborative pilot study by Canadian and Belgian administrators and researchers, motivated by the on-campus observations of a senior Canadian university administrator on a two-semester leave for creative renewal at a Francophone university in Belgium.

During the course of his first semester living on-campus among students, the number of North American accents he heard in daily interactions surprised him. Analysis of registration data at the institution revealed that the majority of North American students at this large Francophone Belgian University were not full-time international students, but study abroad students from a variety of Canadian institutions. In 2014-2015, there were approximately one hundred North American students on study abroad at this one institution, including 90 from Canadian universities and 10 from American universities, whereas Canadian is the study abroad destination of choice for students from this one Belgian university. The Canadian students represent the largest non-European group of incoming study-abroad students at the host university.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

Our study design began with an in-depth analysis of the education systems in Canada and Belgium, which highlighted important differences in alignment. Key differences in PSE access philosophies notwithstanding, there are also significant differences in pedagogical and evaluation practices at the university level. Comprehension of the alignment gaps and differences between the two systems is not widespread.

Dubet's (1994) sociology of experience, Bourdieu's (1982) social capital and habitus, Coulon's (2005) *métier étudiant* and Mezirow's (1991, 1997, 2000) transformative learning theory (Parks Daloz, 2000), inform our theoretical framework. Our design was further informed by studies on global perspective taking (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Braskamp et al., 2009; Merrill et al., 2012), cultural and academic

knowledge (Braskamp et al., 2009; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Vande Berg et al., 2009), as well as study abroad and student mobility (Aslan & Jacobs, 2014; Anderson et al., 2006; Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Forsey et al., 2011; King, 2012; McPherson & Heisel, 2010; Perry et al., 2012; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011; Salisbury et al., 2009; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2012).

Methods

A case study (Creswell, 2005; Yin, 2009) was ideally suited to help us gain deeper understanding of the experiences of a particular group of international students on a one-semester stay abroad at a large francophone university in Belgium. Our data collection tools included electronic surveys in French and in English, as well as individual follow-up e-mail exchanges with interested participants.

The electronic survey, available in French and English, was developed using the Survey Monkey platform. It was inspired by previous surveys developed by the researchers to explore international students' experience of transition to university in Canada. Questions were informed by data gleaned from a literature review of studies regarding study abroad in a variety of national contexts.

Our intent for the pilot study was to gain a better understanding of 1) Canadian students' motivation to participate in and expectations of a one-semester study abroad, 2) their motivation for choosing this particular institution, 3) their perceptions to date of their actual lived academic and social experiences during the study-abroad, and 4) social and academic challenges related to their study-abroad. Of the 90 Canadian students invited to participate in the study, thirty-three Francophone and ten Anglophone students completed the respective surveys, representing a participation rate of almost 50%.

Results

Among the key findings, with regards to challenges prior to their semester abroad, 45% of participants identified having challenging interactions with their home institution, whereas 43% found the alignment gaps between their home program and the course offerings at the host institution to be challenging. There appears to be a correlation between these two findings.

Once at their host institution, participants report the complexities of setting up home in their new country (82%), and organising their program of study (79%) as the two most significant initial challenges. As their stay progressed, more than 80% of participants indicated adapting to the pedagogical approaches of the host institution as the greatest challenge. This last finding in itself is quite significant.

In follow-up email exchanges, student explained that they were ill prepared for the types of assessment and evaluation practices in Belgium, which includes individual oral examinations and high-stakes final assessments with little or no assignments during the semester. Participants shared the challenges of negotiating two very different academic calendars, in that students who studied abroad during the Fall semester had to return to Canada prior to the January exams in order to begin the Winter semester at their home institution. Participants had not anticipated these two particular challenges.

Implications

The implications of this pilot study can be converged with other international perspectives to inform our shared responsibilities regarding the quality of short and medium-term study abroad experiences for our students. In light of the pressure to internationalize universities from within through student study abroad, the pedagogical gap finding of this study has implications regarding to 1) institutionalizing assessment and evaluation practices of initiatives and 2) the importance of student voice to inform institutional policies and practices. It also raises important questions regarding the roles and responsibilities of the both home and host institutions in preparing and supporting students who study abroad. Next steps in 2015-2016 include conducting a larger student voice study with the host institution's students on study abroad in Canada, and study abroad students from one Canadian university on study abroad worldwide, with on a particular focus on the pedagogical gap.

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