Can a Study Abroad Experience Increase Business Students' Openness to Diversity and Challenge?

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Abstract. This study used Pascarella *et al.*'s (1996) Openness to Diversity and Challenges Scale (ODC) to measure undergraduate business students both before and after a six-week study abroad program (SAP) experience. Findings reveal that students who study abroad significantly increased their overall openness to diversity. Notably, significant increases were achieved in all eight items of the ODC scale. Students who study abroad indicate that they enjoy opportunities to challenge their ideas, beliefs, and values and find such experiences to be a valuable component of their college education. The results of this study show greater gains on openness to diversity and challenge from a six-week program than prior SAP accounts based on shorter durations. Implications for educators are provided.

Keywords: academic challenge, diversity, intercultural development, openness to diversity, study abroad programs, transformative learning.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and complex professional landscape, higher education plays a pivotal role in equipping college graduates with the competencies necessary for success. The ability to effectively engage with people who possess different ideas and viewpoints than your own has become an important global business skill. Exposure to diverse ideas, perspectives, and lived experiences promotes the development of critical cognitive and interpersonal skills, facilitating a smoother transition from academic environments to dynamic, multicultural workplaces (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020; Ferst and Zimmerman, 2020; Shim and Perez, 2018; Min, Lee and Park, 2020).

> "*Higher education is well-aware that to maintain its relevance, it must prepare the future workforce for a world in which people interact and work with others whose backgrounds are different than their own and who hold unique values, belief systems, cultural norms, and habits*" (Upson, Iskahova and Barr, 2025, p. 315).

In preparation for this diverse workplace, business educators are expected to develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020; Mello, 2022). Alvarez-Huerta, Muela and Larrea (2022) found that students who are open to new ideas and challenges are more confident in their creative abilities and more disposed toward critical thinking. Engaging with individuals from varied cultural, socioeconomic, and ideological backgrounds challenges students to examine complex issues from multiple vantage points. Numerous researchers indicate that exposure to cultural diversity fosters creativity, critical thinking, and holistic problem-solving by prompting individuals to question ingrained assumptions and consider alternative viewpoints (Cha *et al.*, 2025; Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020; Harper and Yeung, 2013; Hurtado, 2005; Strategic Leaders Consulting, 2024). Critical thinking is advanced through exposure to new ways of approaching life (Alvarez-Huerta, Muela and Larrea, 2022). Exposure to diverse groups cultivates cognitive flexibility, encourages innovation, and strengthens decision-making capabilities; all of which are valued skills for global business professionals (Scott and Sandell, 2023). However, traditional classroom experiences sometimes fail to fully prepare students with the intercultural skills, associated with an openness to diversity, which are so highly valued by employers (Bowman and Park, 2015; Cabrera *et al.*, 1998; Shim and Perez, 2018; Stuart, 2025). As such, educators must continue to seek out novel approaches to develop these important skills.

The ability to participate in a diverse community may be a key to future employment. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2023), nearly 85% of recent graduates who engaged with diverse learning communities were employed or pursuing further education within six months of graduation. From a career development perspective, the ability to work with people from differing backgrounds and cultures confers strategic advantages for both graduates and employers (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020; Sanner *et al.*, 2010; Roberson *et al.*, 2017; Shen *et al.*, 2009). Graduates who are adept at working with diverse groups from other countries are better positioned to contribute to such organizations by offering insights that enhance customer engagement and market responsiveness (Cha *et al.*, 2025; Hunt *et al.*, 2018; Jones, 2003; Min, Lee and Park, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2009).

Openness to diversity constitutes a foundational element in the preparation of future global business leaders (Ferst and Zimmerman, 2020; Scott and Sandell, 2023). The development of global mindsets and intercultural competencies, both critical for success in international business, depends on a willingness to embrace intellectual challenges and adopt alternative perspectives, which form the basis of the openness to diversity framework (Lee *et al.*, 2012). Actively engaging with individuals from different cultural backgrounds is essential for advancing cultural intelligence (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Varela and Gatlin-Watts, 2014), strengthening cross-cultural competencies (Elo *et al.*, 2015; Leung *et al.*, 2014; Yari *et al.*, 2020), and cultivating a global mindset (Andresen and

Bergdolt, 2017; Bücker and Poutsma, 2010). These capabilities are consistently identified as prerequisites for success in diverse international business contexts (Ott and Michailova, 2018; Fang *et al.*, 2018). As Langinier, Gabhann, and Mehmanpazir (2023) emphasize, the ability to navigate cultural complexity is fundamental to establishing the cultural intelligence required of managers in an increasingly globalized environment.

In addition, exposure to diverse groups serves as a catalyst for the development of essential interpersonal and communication skills (Alvarez-Huerta, Muela and Larrea, 2022; Han and Pistole, 2017). Collaborative learning environments that include students from different national, ethnic, and social backgrounds promote empathy, adaptability, and cultural intelligence (Lombardi, 2011; Van der Zee and Van der Gang, 2007; Yakunina *et al.*, 2012). These competencies are increasingly valued by employers seeking candidates capable of navigating global markets and multicultural teams (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020). Leifels and Zhang (2023) maintain that openness to cultural diversity exerts a considerable influence on group dynamics and social interactions, thereby fostering improved team well-being. Improved cross-cultural communication skills, cultivated though engagement with diverse groups, have been shown to enhance inclusion, collaboration, global competence, and leadership (Mitchell and Vandegrift, 2014; Cha *et al.*, 2025).

Moreover, diverse educational settings encourage self-contemplation and enable students to recognize and address their own biases and assumptions (Bowman and Park, 2015; Dolby, 2003; Lombardi, 2011; Wortman, 2002). According to Whitt *et al.*, (2001), students with a higher openness to diversity find deeper understanding of their own personal values through considering challenges to their ideas and beliefs. Overall, students willing to engage with people who may possess differing ideas and values than their own are better prepared for life after graduation (Han and Pistole, 2017; Min, Lee and Park, 2020; Mitchell and Vandegrift, 2014).

2. Transformation from Study Abroad Programs (SAPs)

Study abroad programs (SAPs) may be uniquely positioned to cultivate the skill set that business students will need to function in a global environment (Holtbrugge and Engelhard, 2016; Iskhakova and Bradly, 2022). Studying abroad constitutes a pivotal educational experience that significantly contributes to the complete development of college graduates (Tarrant, Rubin and Stoner, 2014). SAPs dictate sustained engagement with host cultures, compelling students to navigate unfamiliar environments, interact with diverse communities, and reflect on their own cultural assumptions (Walters *et al.*, 2016). Cultural immersion through study abroad facilitates direct exposure to varied customs, traditions, and communication styles. Janda and McHaney (2025) suggested that living in the

country may be the most effective way to gain cultural understanding. By immersing students in unfamiliar cultural and academic environments, SAPs cultivate a suite of competencies that are increasingly indispensable in both personal and professional domains (Nguyen, Jefferies and Rojas, 2018; Upson, Iskahova and Barr, 2025).

SAPs further represent a critical component of international education by offering students immersive experiences that promote openness to diversity, empathy, tolerance, and intercultural aptitude (Coker, Heiser and Taylor, 2018; Jaiswal and Sapkota, 2024; Wilson, 2021). Such experiences challenge ethnocentric perspectives and promote a more inclusive worldview (Dwyer and Peters, 2004; Mahapatra, Haney and Waite, 2025). By coming face-to-face with diverse cultures, students may reconceptualize their own views (Coker, Heiser and Taylor, 2018; Dolby, 2004). Students frequently report a reduction in cultural bias and an increased appreciation for the complexity of global societies (Walters, Charles, and Bingham, 2017; Song and Austria, 2024). This process of confronting and reevaluating preconceived notions cultivates empathy and a deeper understanding of shared human values, such as the universal pursuit of connection, purpose, and dignity (Coker, Heiser and Taylor, 2018; Dwyer and Peters, 2004; Gaia, 2015). Wortman (2002) proclaims that "by studying outside our society, we can better appreciate the diversity within it" (p. 7).

One of the most profound outcomes of studying abroad is the enhancement of intercultural competence and a global perspective (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Langinier, Gabhann and Mehmanpazir, 2023; Zuo and Hu, 2022). Exposure to diverse cultural paradigms compels students to engage with alternative modes of thinking, communication, and problem-solving (Cathorall, Peachey and Najjuma, 2025). This experiential learning cultivates a nuanced understanding of cultural relativism and global interconnectedness, thereby equipping students with the ability to collaborate more effectively across cultural boundaries (Hett, 1993). SAPs, as a form of experiential learning, are widely recognized for its transformative impact on students' personal and professional development (Bradly and Iskhakova, 2023; Bradly, Iskhahova and Ott, 2025; Iskhahova and Bradly, 2022; Janda and McHaney, 2025; Sobkowiak, 2019). Toncar and Cudmore (2000) summarized that it is obvious that SAP students are forever "changed"; the challenge is to identify the specific areas of these personal changes.

3. Diversity and Study Abroad Programs

One possible transformative result from SAPs might be that students become more open to diverse people, ideas, and values. If SAPs were verified to advance the students' abilities to engage with varied peoples and environments, then these programs could serve as another valuable tool for educators preparing students for