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Enhancing Student Development Through a Virtual Study Abroad Business Course: A Proposed Design for Global Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad programs represent an effective way to enhance student learning and development in business higher education, especially in international business, marketing, and trade. However, in the face of disruptors and barriers that affect a student's ability to travel internationally, virtual study abroad (VSA) programs can be a more accessible alternative to achieving comparable outcomes. This paper presents a purposeful design for VSA programs with comprehensive goals of students' personal, cultural, and professional development. Our study provides measurement and analysis of their effectiveness and demonstrates notable improvement across twelve essential facets of personal, cultural, and professional learning objectives among participants engaged in a virtual, project-based study abroad program. These findings underscore the significance of VSA programs and advocate for their continued inclusion in university curricula.

KEYWORDS

Study abroad programs; virtual learning; project-based learning; experiential learning; virtual global teams

1. Introduction

The general format, content, and value of traditional, in-person business study abroad programs are well-known in academia. They include short- and long-term overseas trips with courses at local universities, language classes, and homestays with host families or accommodations in international dormitories. They also include scholastic and industrial activities, cultural events, and weekend trips. Moreover, traditional study abroad programs provide pre-orientation services and other forms of logistical support before and throughout the program, such as travel bookings, international health insurance, visas, cultural shock counseling services, etc. In most instances, a typical study abroad program is a good “one stop shop” option for university students who are interested in spending anywhere from one week to a full semester or more abroad (Johnson and Jordan 2019). In the spring of 2020, however, this all changed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The worldwide spread of the pandemic motivated professors, study abroad coordinators, and travel education providers to innovate and create new, feasible options to the more traditional study abroad model – virtual study abroad (VSA) programs (Upson and Bergiel 2022). These programs also had to address similar learning outcomes, such as the development of global awareness and cultural intelligence, language acquisition, appropriate academic knowledge and skills related to a student's major, and the acquisition of personal and professional skills that come with living, studying, and even working overseas (Stoica, Florea, and Harnowo 2023).

In this paper, we present a VSA design developed for the purpose of enhancing students' personal, cultural, and professional development. We illustrate the benefits and advantages of VSA programs in terms of overcoming financial constraints, degree plan restrictions, logistical complexities, cultural and familial barriers, and risk management concerns. We further address the question of whether VSA programs are just a fad or can provide a viable alternative to traditional study abroad programs for the foreseeable future, regardless of COVID-19 and other disruptions and limitations students may encounter.

We collected data through the utilization of surveys with a pre-post design, as recommended by the literature (Littrell et al. 2006; Peng, Van Dyne, and Oh 2015) and examined students' learning effectiveness in three key areas – personal, cultural, and professional – resulting from our virtual study abroad design. We then discuss whether VSA programs can be integrated with traditional study abroad programs to provide a convenient and effective learning experience.

To address these questions, the paper is structured as follows. After this Introduction section, we highlight and review pertinent literature. Next, we provide a description of virtual study abroad programs, followed by our Methodology section, where we detail our data collection process of pre- and post-practicum surveys. The Results section presents, analyzes, and discusses the empirical findings, including the assessment of learning outcomes. Finally, we conclude by discussing the contributions, implications, limitations, and suggested future research.

2. Literature review

The effectiveness of study abroad programs in business higher education is well-documented in the international business pedagogy literature (e.g., Howard and Keller 2009; Black and Duhon 2006; Olsen and Lalley 2012; Sachau et al. 2010). We classify the benefits of study abroad experiences into three main categories: personal development, cultural intelligence development, and the enhancement of professional knowledge and skills. Personal development focuses on respect for others, flexibility, openness, emotional

resilience, and personal autonomy (Black and Duhon 2006; Howard and Keller 2009; Olson and Lalley 2012; Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010). Cultural intelligence emphasizes understanding of other cultures, culture sensitivity, cultural empathy, and effective cross-cultural communication (Black and Duhon 2006; Howard and Keller 2009; Olson and Lalley 2012; Rickter et al. 2021; Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010). Finally, professional knowledge and skills include teamwork, core business knowledge, time management, and professionalism (Black and Duhon 2006; Howard and Keller 2009; Olson and Lalley 2012; Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010).

Traditionally, study broad programs involve international travel, and students may take classes, visit business sites, participate in a variety of cultural activities, study a language, and engage in volunteer work, depending on the program format. Year-long and semester-long study abroad programs have been particularly popular, with the 2018–2019 academic year seeing over 347,000 U.S. students embarking on such journeys (Doors 2020). However, not all students can afford the time or financial resources required for these extended trips. In recognition of these constraints, many universities have introduced short-term study abroad programs in the form of summer semester abroad, study tour, or service-learning trips (Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a significant disruption in international travel, leading universities to suspend their traditional study abroad programs. In response, virtual study abroad programs were conceived and developed, providing students opportunities to earn academic credit while gaining international experience (Upson and Bergiel, 2022).

Following the lifting of travel restrictions and the resumption of traditional study abroad programs, a critical question arises: can virtual study abroad programs offer significant value that complements the benefits of traditional programs in students' personal, cultural, and professional development? Recent advancements in VSA research examine various aspects of its effectiveness. For instance, Dorroll and Caballero-Garcia (2020) found VSA to be an effective means of promoting intercultural knowledge. Similarly, Deacon and Miles (2022); Garcia et al. (2023) studied the impact of VSA programs on students' global mindedness. Krishnan et al. (2022) also indicate that VSA can enhance students' intercultural competence. Lee, Leibowitz, and Rezek (2022) suggest that VSA participation increases the likelihood of subsequent traditional study abroad experiences. Upson and Bergiel (2022) conceptually investigate the potential of VSAs and find VSAs hold sufficient value to continue as legitimate study abroad programs for international business education. Cho, Feng, and Ulusoy (2024) found that virtual service learning of international business enhanced students' professional growth and civic learning. Mlodzianowska, Rossini, and Manhas (2024) showed online international learning and global virtual teams helped the development of students' cross-cultural understanding and communication and collaboration skills.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of research providing a purposeful design of VSA programs, with empirical data supporting their enduring value across personal, cultural, and professional development goals. To bridge the gap in the literature, the current study introduces and empirically evaluates a VSA program design that replicates the comprehensive benefits of traditional study abroad experiences while enhancing students' virtual communication and collaboration skills. Moreover, the program offers significant advantages to students and administrators by drastically reducing financial constraints, degree plan restrictions, logistical complexities, cultural and familial barriers, and risk management concerns.

Drawing on the existing body of literature, we identify the four key considerations in the design of VSA programs to enhance their long-term efficacy. First, virtual study abroad programs should deliver in-depth cross-cultural experiences. Cultural immersion has consistently been an important feature of the study abroad experience, nurturing students' cultural intelligence (Black and Duhon 2006; Howard and Keller 2009; Olson and Lalley 2012; Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010). The absence of in-person cultural immersion poses a notable challenge for virtual programs, raising concerns about their effectiveness. This concern is particularly pertinent in the realm of international business, where research has demonstrated the importance of understanding cultural nuances for the successful management of global virtual teams (Tavoletti et al. 2022). Fortunately, a VSA program can bridge this gap and offer meaningful cultural immersion experiences (Upson and Bergiel 2023) through activities such as language classes, culture classes, food tastings, and online meetings with foreign peers. In addition, VSA programs can incorporate virtual international tours to cultural and historical landmarks, including museums and iconic sites, enriching the overall immersive experience.

Second, VSA programs should incorporate project-based learning opportunities with international companies and organizations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual learning projects and internships had already gained traction in the realm of international business education, as evidenced by prior research (Bleicher et al. 2019; Hernandez-Pozas and Carreon-Flores 2019; Marr 2019; Zwerg-Villegas and Hiller 2020). Compared to traditional study abroad programs, a VSA incorporating project-based learning, such as a global consulting project, offers distinct advantages. These VSA initiatives can allocate more time and attention to solving real-world business problems, primarily because students are not physically present in the host country where they might otherwise need to balance in-person visits and lectures. Likewise, a participating company can dedicate more of its resources to the project itself, rather than the logistical considerations. For example, the company does not need to arrange physical meeting spaces that disrupt ongoing operations. Moreover, coordinating schedules for employees and managers to engage with students via

efficient tools like Zoom is generally more straightforward, enabling seamless communication amongst participants located in different geographic regions. Virtual project-based learning has also been shown to be an effective means of developing students' professional competencies through problem analysis, in-depth investigation, and team collaboration (Bishop-Monroe et al. 2022). Throughout these projects, students also have the opportunity to develop cross-cultural communication, leadership, and time management skills, further enhancing the learning process. In addition, business ethics, such as information confidentiality, work integrity, and cultural respect, can be better understood and practiced in project-based scenarios.

Third, VSA programs should foster collaborative engagement with students, faculty, mentors, and professionals located in foreign countries. Over the past three decades, the evolution of information technologies has led to the increasing prevalence of virtual global teams in the field of international business driven by compelling factors like cost efficiency, access to diverse talent pools, and enhanced flexibility (Bergiel, Bergiel, and Balsmeier 2008; Maznevski and Chudoba 2000; Pinar et al. 2014). In the post COVID-19 era, the reliance on virtual meetings and telework became the sole viable option for many international businesses (Makarius and Mukherjee 2020). Even after restrictions on international trips were lifted, the popularity of virtual teams remains (Gilli et al. 2022). Virtual study abroad programs have the unique potential to emulate and offer students immersive experiences mirroring the dynamics of global virtual teams, equipping students with essential skillsets required for effective communication and collaboration amongst multinational teammates (Chappell and Schermerhorn 2021; Gavidia, Mogollón, and Baena 2005; Shea et al. 2011).

Fourth and lastly, VSA programs should be meticulously designed and efficiently implemented to capitalize on the streamlined logistics enhancing accessibility for all participants and fostering diversity. A well-structured VSA program allows students to partake in international business experiences from anywhere with an internet connection, circumventing the financial burden associated with travel, accommodations, and living expenses in foreign countries (Gonzalez-Perez et al. 2014; Madden, McMillan, and Madden 2019). Therefore, VSA programs present a cost-effective, low-risk alternative for students from lower-income backgrounds, those with disabilities or mobility challenges, and individuals without prior international travel experience. Moreover, they present a financially and temporally efficient option for engaging guest speakers and business partners. As a result, professionals, including industry experts and upper-level managers are more inclined to participate in these programs. Additionally, the collaborative nature of VSA programs, where students from diverse geographic locations work together to address real-world business problems, offers an invaluable opportunity for students to learn from a culturally diverse and geographically dispersed group of peers, thereby gaining a global perspective (Wu et al. 2022).

Overall, traditional study abroad programs continue to offer unique benefits, such as immersive cultural experiences, language immersion, and the opportunity to build a network of international contacts (GoAbroad.com 2020). However, VSA programs hold the potential to complement and enrich international business education, contributing to the attainment of more robust learning outcomes. Next, we present a detailed exposition of a VSA design.

3. A design of virtual study abroad programs with global consulting projects

To be successful, VSA program must diligently orchestrate its content and activities to align with the learning goals. As depicted in Table 1, the program should commence with a focused theme coupled with a series of informative and context-rich lectures that provide a clear picture and context of the geographic location where the VSA program takes place. These lectures may be delivered by the practicum instructor or guest lecturers with expertise in the chosen theme and geographic region, such as fellow professors at the university, professors from a university in the chosen region, diplomats from a local embassy, private sector or industry professionals, or consultants in one or more of the subject areas that are relevant to the theme and geography of the VSA program. A crucial factor in this series of lectures is to make the content interdisciplinary in nature. To achieve this goal, a variety of topics can be addressed, such as politics, economics, culture or society, history, technology, laws and regulations, the environment, and the arts, as this is the best way to provide a comprehensive, contextual picture of the country or region that the students will be studying. These lectures can start at the beginning of the VSA and continue throughout the program to supplement new activities and other interdisciplinary content.

Table 1. Activities in the virtual study abroad program.

Phase 1	Phase 2
• Regional focus or around the world – doing business in Latin America, Europe, Africa, or Asia • Business Models – PESTLE, Hofstede, Porter's 5 Forces, SWOT, 4 P's, proformas • Modules on effective consulting and participating in global teams • Guest Lecture Series – regional and/or thematic, business, culture, geopolitics • International business simulation (strategy, marketing, or trade) • Case study competition with executive level coaching and support • Networking opportunities with industry professionals • Interdisciplinary – humanities, STEM, business • Virtual/Learning Management System (LMS) • Embedded in existing class or stand-alone • Pre-survey – student personal, cultural, and professional baseline (quantitative)	• Vetted global consulting projects with "live" clients and "real" projects • Teams of 4 or 5 – 1 foreign student, 3 – 4 Americans • American and foreign professors and mentors • Final written report and PowerPoint presentation to client • Supplemental business visits, lectures, and cultural activities • Professional, career, and leadership development modules • Business language usage and/or concurrent language classes • Internationalization of curriculum • Virtual/Learning Management System (LMS) • Embedded in existing class or stand-alone • Post-survey on student personal, cultural, and professional development (quantitative) • Focus group on student experience (qualitative)

Besides the lectures, online business simulations and case studies are critical methods to allow students to apply their knowledge into practice in the VSA program. The simulations should focus on international business strategy, marketing, operations, or trade, but choosing the right simulation depends on the makeup of your students, the theme of your program, and its geographic region. Case studies on companies or organizations in the chosen country or region can also be a great way to enhance the virtual learning experience. The business simulations and case studies can act as important precursors to the global consulting projects that come later in the program, by fostering important skills of identifying and analyzing problems, thinking critically, and solving problems in a team, while reinforcing content and concepts learned in the lectures.

Upon completion of the business simulation and case study activities, students will have more confidence and enhanced skills primed to engage with clients in addressing a real-world problem as a cohesive and efficient global consulting team. After organizing students into global teams of 4 to 6 members, the real-world, global consulting project begins by a comprehensive presentation from the clients, outlining their problems and expectations. Subsequently, a series of weekly meetings ensues, providing a platform for students to present their research, deliverables, and findings. The client organization then provides feedback on these discoveries, poses additional questions, and provides valuable guidance. These meaningful interactions typically occur during the second part of the VSA program, affording the students ample time to meticulously analyze the problem at hand, as well as the client institution, market, and competitors. The analysis facilitates the formulation of alternative solutions, culminating in the presentation of their final recommendations (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and a detailed implementation plan (through a comprehensive written report).

Before the global consulting project begins, it is critical to identify and examine dedicated external partners willing to collaborate. To do so, the practicum instructor needs to identify organizations experienced in working with students and willing to commit to these projects. In our case, government agencies such as the US Commercial Service, chambers of commerce, the US Department of Agriculture, the Foreign Agriculture Services, and the instructor's contacts in both the private and public sectors helped source the clients and projects. Ideal partners should allocate a meaningful amount of time (about 15 hours), grant access to information and their employees, have a well-defined problem that students can contribute to solving, and establish realistic expectations and deliverables that align well with students' capabilities and time commitments. After these partner relationships are established and the project objectives have been clearly outlined, students meet with clients in the introductory meeting, during which a comprehensive overview of the organization is provided. This introductory session encompasses an exposition of the problem at hand, the presentation of expectations and deliverables, and the initial scheduling of follow-up meetings.

Additionally, in instances where project-related information is confidential due to internal procedures or strategic considerations, a non-disclosure agreement may be required. A scope of work document should be crafted by the instructor or by the students themselves to outline the expectations, deliverables, and agenda. (See a sample Scope of Work in [Appendix A](#)).

Following the introductory meeting, the students and clients will convene on five or six additional occasions each lasting one to two hours. These meetings serve to delve into specific questions, engage with domain specialists within the client organization, conduct virtual visits to gain a deeper understanding of the organization's operations and processes, conduct internal and external surveys involving customers, suppliers, buyers, and key stakeholders. This phase also entails the ongoing evaluation and refinement of project deliverables. A designated company project leader acts as a coordinator between the students and the organization, with the instructor assuming a more passive role during this phase of the consulting projects. Each student team is further supported by a mentor, a professor or industry professional with the requisite business acumen, topical knowledge, and experience.

In the final phase of the project, the instructor resumes a more involved role, overseeing students as they submit a well-structured draft of their final report and conduct a practice run of their concluding presentation. The written report and final presentation can be done in English or the language of the host client's country, depending on the students' proficiency. Subsequently, students get feedback, revise accordingly, and proceed to deliver the report and presentation to the client and its upper management. To facilitate this process, the report is submitted one week prior to the presentation slides, allowing the client to review the document and prepare questions for the presentation. The overarching aim of the project is to provide students with the opportunity to collaborate with an industrial client, conduct real-world research, and propose feasible solutions.

In addition, to enhance the overall appeal, viability, and impact of VSA program, it is important to include interactive cultural activities throughout the practicum. For example, students can partake in a brief language class, engage in local dance or music lessons, explore culinary traditions through interactive cooking sessions with a local chef, virtually attend local holiday events or celebrations, develop online pen pal relationships with local university students, or engage in virtual tours of culturally significant museums or monuments. While these types of virtual cultural activities may not fully replicate the tactile or sensory experience of in-person immersion, they do offer a sample that can be both memorable and impactful.

While participating in these types of virtual activities can have a strong impact on students, the integration of additional pre- and post-assignments makes their impact even more substantial. By assigning readings, videos, and research tasks related to the client organization, coupled with guest lectures on culinary traditions, holidays events, dances, or historical

monuments before students engage in business and cultural activities, educators can ensure active student engagement. Students can be encouraged to submit two to three questions in advance of each virtual business visit, cultural activity, or guest lecture. After these virtual activities, students can also be asked to author reflective papers, summarizing their experience, key takeaways, and overall insights. Finally, the instructor can host a debriefing or discussion session, in which students can share experiences and expand on their key insights.

Generally speaking, VSA programs may not give students the immersive experience that comes with a traditional, in-person, study abroad program. However, the activities outlined above show that VSA programs can orchestrate interactive and meaningful activities that can provide positive impacts on students' learning, all at lower cost, greater accessibility, reduced logistics, and lower risk.

4. Methodology

We conducted empirical analysis on the effectiveness of a VSA program structured as depicted in the previous section. For each of these two VSA programs, students voluntarily responded to a pre- and a post-program survey administered through Qualtrics. In the pre-program survey, we captured students' demographics, including their classification, major, and language skills. In both pre- and post-program surveys, we measured students' comfort level of virtual learning and their self-evaluation on the key learning attributes. Based on the literature of traditional study abroad programs (Black and Duhon 2006; Howard and Keller 2009; Olson and Lalley 2012; Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010), we classified the learning attributes of international programs into three broad categories, i.e., personal development, cultural development, and professional development. These three categories can be further broken down into 40 aspects, presented in Table 2. We developed two sets of closed-ended questions in the survey questionnaires to measure students' improvement on these key dimensions before and after the program. Moreover, we also measured students' satisfaction, likelihood of recommendation, and preference between VSA and traditional study abroad in the post-program survey. To assess the learning effectiveness, we applied Student's *t* test (Efron 1969) to compare the variables measured before and after the VSA programs. The empirical results are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Table 2. Learning objectives of virtual study abroad program.

Personal development	Cultural development	Professional development
Self-awareness	Language usage and proficiency	Persuasion
Self-reliance	Cross-cultural communication	Written and oral business communication
Stress	Adaptability	Business language proficiency
Confidence	Initiating and handling change	Business etiquette
Socialization	Tolerance	Decision making
Relationship building	Resilience	Critical thinking and problem solving
Patience	Curiosity	Time management
Humility	Global awareness	Innovation
Creativity	Worldview transformation	Teamwork
Flexibility	Respect for other cultures	Networking
Openness		Sales and negotiation
		Business plan development
		Strategic thinking and planning
		Application of international business theory and models
		Interpretation and creation of financial models and statements
		Social media marketing and tools
		Data analytics software and tools
		Excel
		PowerPoint

5. Results

Among the 67 responses collected in the pre-program survey conducted in the Spring semester from 2021 to 2024, 4 were freshmen, 12 were sophomores, 15 were juniors, 33 were senior students, and 3 were graduate students. 45% of students majored in international business, 10% in management, and 45% in other majors. In terms of English proficiency, 16% of the respondents self-evaluated as “advanced,” 72% “proficient,” and 5% “upper intermediate.” 76% spoke a second language, and 33% spoke a third language. 70% of respondents had prior international travel experience. 60% traveled to other countries for personal or family-related reasons, while 33% had studied abroad. 13% participated in exchange programs, and 6% gained work experience in other countries. The mean comfort level with virtual project-based learning was 4.04 out of 7, and the mean comfort level with virtual academic instruction was 4.10 out of 7.

In the post-program survey, 49 responses were collected. We found the mean comfort level with virtual project-based learning increased to 6.06 out of 7, significantly improved from the pre-program survey ($t = 6.78, p < .01$). The mean comfort level with virtual academic instruction increased to 6.18, but not significantly ($t = 5.36, p < .01$). The mean satisfaction with the VSA learning experience was 5.59 out of 7. 53% of respondents suggested the VSA program was beyond or far beyond their expectations. The mean likelihood of recommending the VSA program to other students was 5.84 out of 7. Compared to traditional study abroad, 14% of the respondents considered

the VSA a better choice considering travel or financial restrictions. 27% of the respondents believed that the VSA was a good substitute given the restrictions. 23% suggested the VSA was a reasonable alternative with restrictions. Overall, 76% considered VSA a better or acceptable alternative (See Figure 1).

Table 3 summarized the self-evaluation results of the key aspects under the three learning objective categories. Respondents rated their performance on each of the aspects before and after the VSA program. In the personal development category, we found a statistical one-tail significance for improvement in socialization ($t = 1.88, p = .06$). In the cultural development category, cross-cultural communication ($t = 2.84, p < .01$) and global awareness ($t = 2.20, p = .03$) showed significant improvement. The increase in resilience is one-tail significant ($t = 1.82, p = .07$). In the professional development category, results suggested that students were doing better on eight dimensions after the VSA program: significantly on business etiquette ($t = 2.41, p = .02$), decision making ($t = 2.36, p = .02$), critical thinking and problem solving ($t = 2.60, p = .01$), networking ($t = 2.05, p = .04$), sales and negotiation ($t = 2.38, p = .02$), the application of international business theories and models ($t = 2.08, p = .04$), and one-tail significantly on business plan development ($t = 1.83, p = .07$) and data analytics software and tools ($t = 1.96, p = .06$).

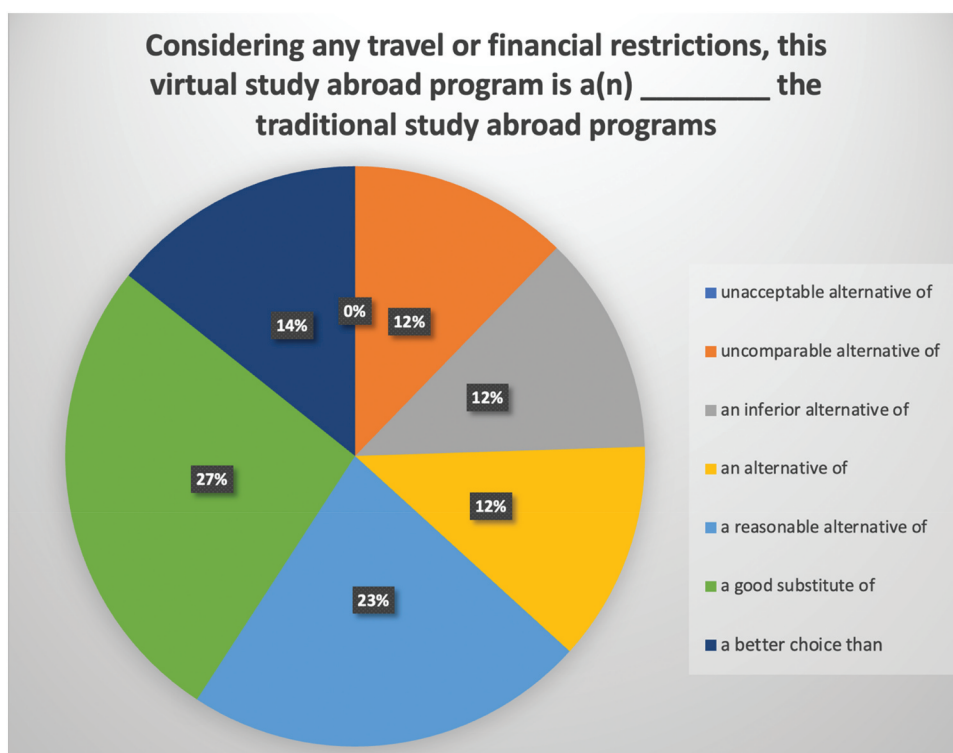


Figure 1. Preference on virtual study abroad compared to traditional study abroad programs.

Table 3. Self-evaluation results of the learning objectives in the pre- and post-vsa surveys.

	Personal development										
	Self-awareness	Self-reliance	Stress	Confidence	Socialization	Relationship building	Patience	Humility	Creativity	Flexibility	Openness
Pre avg	4.16	4.09	3.34	3.65	3.73	3.92	3.81	3.83	3.69	3.91	4.04
Post	4.06	4.08	3.50	3.88	4.04	3.92	3.88	3.77	3.75	3.83	4.13
avg											
t stat	0.73	0.08	0.87	1.51	1.88	0.03	0.38	0.38	0.38	0.45	0.48
p-value	0.46	0.94	0.38	0.14	0.06*	0.97	0.70	0.71	0.71	0.66	0.63
	Cultural development										
	Language usage and proficiency	Cross-cultural communication	Adaptability	Initiating and handling change	Tolerance	Resilience	Curiosity	Global awareness	Worldview transformation	Respect for other cultures	
Pre avg	3.51	3.45	4.09	3.84	4.03	4.02	4.20	3.84	3.79	4.48	
Post	3.58	3.96	4.21	4.15	4.08	4.25	4.10	4.17	3.98	4.40	
avg											
t stat	0.32	2.84	0.86	2.10	0.35	1.82	0.67	2.20	1.28	0.69	
p-value	0.75	<0.01**	0.39	0.04	0.72	0.07*	0.50	0.03**	0.20	0.49	
	Professional development										
	Persuasion	Written, oral business communication	Business language proficiency	Business etiquette	Decision making	Critical thinking and problem solving	Time management	Innovation	Teamwork	Networking	Sales and negotiation
Pre avg	3.58	3.79	3.59	3.52	3.72	3.79	3.62	3.69	4.00	3.48	3.10
Post	3.81	4.04	3.88	3.96	4.13	4.21	3.96	3.81	4.17	3.92	3.60
avg											
t stat	1.22	1.40	1.56	2.41	2.36	2.60	1.38	0.62	0.94	2.05	2.38
p-value	0.22	0.17	0.12	0.02**	0.02**	0.01**	0.17	0.54	0.35	0.04**	0.02**
	Business development										
	Business plan development	Strategic thinking and planning	Application of IB theories and models	Interpretation and creation of financial models and statements	Social media marketing and tools	Data analytics software and tools	Excel	PowerPoint			
Pre avg	3.59	3.93	3.34	3.07	3.59	3.00	3.62	4.07			
Post	3.94	4.08	3.77	3.40	3.77	3.40	3.65	4.21			
avg											
t stat	1.83	0.75	2.08	1.45	0.79	1.95	0.10	0.68			
p-value	0.07*	0.45	0.04**	0.15	0.43	0.05*	0.92	0.50			

*, $p < .10$; **, $p < .05$.

6. Discussion

The empirical results showed that respondents were satisfied with their experiences with the VSA program based on their satisfaction and likelihood of recommending the program, which are significantly greater than the neutral level ($z = 8.41$, $p < .01$ and $z = 14.62$, $p < .01$, respectively). Furthermore, the fact that more than half of the respondents (55%) considered VSA a better or acceptable alternative even without travel restrictions shows the viability of VSAs in the future. Intuitively, there is a substantial segment of college students who would find the value of VSA programs due to other considerations, such as accessibility and costs.

More importantly, respondents found themselves making progress on eight key dimensions of personal, cultural, and professional learning goals by completing the VSA programs. Among the three categories, cultural development appears to be a slightly weaker component of VSA programs, which is largely due to the lack of on-the-ground cultural experiences and language immersion. Nevertheless, students did show significant growth in the areas of cross-cultural communication, socialization, and global awareness, which are all key learning objectives of any international business program (Black and Duhon 2006; Howard and Keller 2009; Olson and Lalley 2012; Sachau, Brasher, and Fee 2010). Furthermore, by incorporating project-based learning and virtual global teamwork, the VSA showed its impact in the categories of professional and personal development. For example, VSAs eliminate the interruptions of traveling and scheduling, so students can be more focused on critical thinking and problem solving through teamwork, using the latest information technologies. Likewise, companies and their employees can eliminate these same interruptions and provide more focused attention on providing much-needed feedback and mentoring to students as they move through the various parts of their global consulting projects. Additionally, students can incorporate what they learn in classroom lectures about international business theory with the practical applications that come from working on global consulting projects with industrial clients. Students can also develop a stronger level of confidence from participating in these types of real-world projects as they provide valuable market research and analysis as well as recommendations that might be implemented into a company's strategy and eventually monetized. Finally, students may develop better time management skills, develop more eloquent oral and written communication skills, acquire greater business acumen and etiquette, and learn to be more flexible, adaptable, and patient.

Traditional study abroad programs undeniably offer unparalleled experiential learning opportunities that have a profound impact on students personally and culturally. However, when analyzing the effectiveness of VSAs on the development of several key learning objectives, especially professional ones,

there emerges a compelling case for the continued integration of VSA programs into the curricula of international business education. This adaptation is crucial for equipping students with the skillsets necessary to thrive in today's interconnected virtual global landscape.

7. Conclusions

Study abroad programs have long been successfully utilized to enhance student understanding of international business and cultures. However, this traditional model has recently been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical events, and the ongoing financial constraints of students and their parents. As a result, universities have pursued alternative options to provide students with crucial international experiential learning opportunities. Accordingly, virtual study abroad (VSA) programs were developed and implemented to attain the key learning objectives of traditional study abroad programs. Now that travel restrictions due to the pandemic have largely been lifted, a question arises as to whether universities should eliminate VSAs and return to the traditional study abroad model or perhaps keep VSAs as a supplementary facilitator of student global experiential learning. Central to this decision by universities to retain or eliminate VSAs is their understanding of actual VSA learning outcome attainment. To address this need, we conducted an assessment of learning outcomes for a series of VSA programs. We found that participants made notable improvements on twelve key dimensions of personal, cultural, and professional learning development goals with minimal concerns related to financial constraints, degree plan restrictions, logistical complexities, cultural and familial barriers, and risk management. These findings support the value of VSAs and their retention in university curricula.

The main contributions of our study include demonstrating strong, comprehensive learning goal outcomes associated with the proposed VSA design, highlighting its intrinsic value in enhancing student experiential learning, and underscoring its extrinsic benefits in terms of cost and risk reduction. These contributions not only fill a gap in the literature but also provide valuable insights to help educators develop a more accessible and immersive experiential learning pedagogy in international business education. The detailed design for VSA programs with an emphasis on global consulting projects has been empirically found to facilitate both learning goal attainment and student personal, cultural, and professional development. It is our profound hope that this study highlighting positive VSA learning goal outcomes helps lead to the juxtaposition of VSAs along with traditional in-person study abroad program options to foster the inclusion of a wider reach of international business students that may be excluded

from participation in an in-person program due to a lack of funds or a medical-related inability to travel.

A limitation of the study that should be noted is its statistically small sample size. Whereas the sample size is deemed sufficient to yield insightful results, future studies should incorporate a sample size of 100 or greater to improve the reliability of the findings. Moreover, future studies should examine a variety of VSA programs and geographical areas of study in their analysis to uncover possible data variances. The authors are presently in the process of developing a larger scale VSA program with a different emphasis and geographic concentration, which should provide rich insights addressing the noted directions for future research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A

Scope of Work Proposal

From (Learners/Institution): Professor [Name of the Professor] and Student Team – [Name of the University]– 3–4 American students and 1–2 international students plus a designated mentor for each team

To (Organizations): [Name of the Company] Project Leader and Company Employees

Dates

Re: Market Entry/Expansion into Country X

The mini-global consulting project will be conducted by [Name of the University] students for 8 weeks. It will focus on the current operations and plans of [Name of the Company] from [Location of the Company] to expand into Country X.

Below is a list of the Meetings, their dates and times, and a basic Agenda for each meeting.

Meeting 1 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Watch videos on Company X website about their products and services.

Introductions from all students and mentors and relevant partner company stakeholders.

- Institutional PowerPoint presentation of company's current products/services, target customers, operations, organizational chart, number of employees, general volumes, and sales.
- Students are required to conduct background research on the companies and principal stakeholders prior to Meeting 1.
- Presentation of problem or issue that partner company would like students to solve.
- Q&A between students, mentor, and partner company.
- Designate a project secretary who can record what is being discussed as well as deliverables for the next meeting. Circulate these notes to everyone in the group.
- Deliverables outlined for next meeting.
- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management: schedule fixed time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student-mentor meeting – schedule fixed time for weekly mentor meeting.
- Project mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting client expectations – e-mail, Zoom, phone.

Meeting 2 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Prepared presentation by students of expansion countries' political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental landscape.
- PESTLE analysis.
- Country risk analysis combined with SWOT analysis of a country and/or several cities or regions.
- Legal issues – incorporation, regulations, licensing, patents, labor, taxes, import/export requirements, etc.
- Students, remember to take a high-level look at the influential macro factors in a market, and then push down or apply the relevant parts of your Analysis to the business model and Problem that was presented in Meeting 1. Additionally, students, remember to apply your

Analysis to 3 key cities in the regions specified above where [Company Name] could expand.

- Q&A between students, mentor, and partner company.
- Designate a project secretary who can record what is being discussed as well as deliverables for the next meeting. Circulate these notes to everyone in the group.
- Deliverables outlined for next meeting.
- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management – schedule fixed time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student/mentor meeting – schedule fixed time for weekly mentor meeting.
- Project mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting client expectations – email, Zoom, phone.

Meeting 3 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Prepared presentation by students of a country or countries' cultural and demographic makeup by region (specified above) as well as their buying habits, preferred price points, and methods of payment.
- Hofstede analysis, business culture.
- Consumer behavior analysis.
- Students, remember to take a high-level look at the cultural trends and consumer/shopping behaviors that drive individuals in a market and in the beer, wine, and in particular liquor sector, and then push down or “apply” the relevant parts of your analysis to the business model and problem that was presented in Meeting 1.
- Q&A between students, mentor, and partner company.
- Designate a project secretary who can record what is being discussed as well as deliverables for the next meeting. Circulate these notes to everyone in the group.
- Deliverables outlined for next meeting.
- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management – schedule set time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student/mentor meeting – schedule set time for weekly mentor meeting.
- Project Mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting Client Expectations – email, Zoom, phone.

Meeting 4 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Prepared presentation by students of a country or countries' industry analysis and competitors in the sector and markets.
- Porters' five forces model.
- Competitive analysis.
- Identification of key players in the liquor sector – potential suppliers, contractors, partners, retailers/grocery stores/convenient stores (big and small) – supply chain.
- Students, remember to take a high-level look at the relevant industry sector and the competition for market share in the market or markets. and then push down or “apply” the relevant parts of your analysis to the business model and problem that was presented in Meeting 1.
- Q&A between students, mentor, and partner company.
- Designate a project secretary who can record what is being discussed as well as deliverables for the next meeting. Circulate these notes to everyone in the group.
- Deliverables outlined for next meeting.

- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management – schedule set time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student/mentor meeting – schedule set time for weekly mentor meeting.
- Project mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting client expectations – email, Zoom, phone.
- Wrap up of analysis.

Meeting 5 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Move into Strategy.
- Prepared presentation by students of a company's market and financial position, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- SWOT analysis (both in the US and in Brazil – by city).
- 4 Ps of marketing (product, place, price, promotion).
- Corporate social responsibility (CSR) or sustainability plan or model – 3 Ps of people, planet, and profit.
- Price sheet and/or 3-year proforma budget/forecast (revenues, initial costs, ongoing costs, profits, key financial ratios – ROI for example).
- Students, remember to take a detailed look at a company's financial and market position and then push down or “apply” the relevant parts of your analysis to the business model and problem that was presented in Meeting 1.
- Final Q&A between students, mentor, and partner company.
- Designate a project secretary who can record what is being discussed as well as deliverables for the next meeting. Circulate these notes to everyone in the group.
- Deliverables outlined for next meeting.
- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management – schedule set time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student/mentor meeting – schedule set time for weekly mentor meeting.
- Project mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting client expectations – email, Zoom, phone.

Meeting 6 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Prepared presentation by students on the distribution, logistics, overall SCM/value, and web interface related to the company's product(s) or service(s).
- Supply chain management and/or logistics – getting products or services from point a to point z – shipping costs, documentation, import taxes on liquor, etc.
- Basic website design and development – front and back end, payment systems
- Students, remember to take a detailed look at how a company currently gets their product(s) and/or service(s) to the market and how this process can be improved (adding value to the supply chain). and then push down or “apply” the relevant parts of your Analysis to the Business Model and Problem that was presented in Meeting 1.
- Q&A between students, mentor, and partner company.
- Designate a project secretary who can record what is being discussed as well as deliverables for the next meeting. Circulate these notes to everyone in the group.
- Deliverables outlined for next meeting.
- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management – schedule set time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student/Mentor meeting – schedule set time for weekly mentor meeting.

- Project mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting client expectations – email, Zoom, phone.

Meeting 7 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone] [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Students meet with clients to go over any final questions.
- Students will also meet with their teams and mentors on [Date].
- Any additional work time outside of class can be scheduled by teams.
- This week will be dedicated to the refinement of each team's final written report and PowerPoint presentation. Students must turn in drafts of each for professor(s) to review and provide feedback.
- Project mentors check in with companies to verify that student tasks are meeting client expectations – email, Zoom, phone.

Meeting 8 [Day], [Date], [Time], [Time Zone]. [Zoom link to be furnished].

- Final written report and presentation by students of items from Meetings 2 to 6, their market entry or expansion strategy recommendations, and a basic timeline and implementation plan for the rollout plan – 20 to 25 minutes.
- Market entry strategy – greenfield, brownfield, joint venture, merger and acquisition, licensing, partnering, exporting, etc.
- Timing, milestones, and scale of market entry strategy.
- All student teams will attend the final presentations.
- Feedback will be given by partner company representative(s).
- Teamwork/delegation of tasks/project management – schedule set time(s) for weekly meetings.
- Student/mentor meeting – schedule set time for weekly mentor meeting.