



Research article

The benefits of virtual learning abroad programs for higher education students: A phenomenological research study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Learning abroad
Student perceptions
Intercultural competencies
Interpretative phenomenological analysis

ABSTRACT

Background: Higher education institutions offer in-country learning abroad programs to provide healthcare students with the opportunity to gain the intercultural and global competencies they need to work in a globally interconnected world. During the Covid-19 pandemic, institutions offered virtual learning abroad programs as an alternative to the in-country programs, however, little is known about whether they provide comparable benefits to students.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to investigate, and identify, the benefits gained by higher education healthcare students through their participation in a virtual learning abroad program.

Design/Methods: This research implemented a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with four higher education students enrolled in the final year of their healthcare studies. Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Results: The results revealed that virtual programs provide a range of benefits students can use in their future careers. They also provide students with a positive learning experience and an opportunity for personal growth. However, although the benefits students gain from virtual learning abroad programs are similar to those they gain from in-country programs, they are not identical. While virtual learning abroad programs are a viable alternative for in-country programs and offer many benefits, they fail to replicate the intercultural and global competencies that in-country programs offer to students.

Conclusion: This study focusses on virtual learning abroad programs and whether the benefits healthcare students gain from them are comparable to the traditional in-country programs. Students gain personal and professional benefits from these programs without the risks and costs associated with international travel. However, the identified lack of increased global awareness has implications for how the benefits of virtual learning abroad programs should be promoted to students.

1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) institutions are increasing the number of short-term in-country learning abroad programs (LAPs) they offer to students (Institute of International Education, 2022). These programs provide healthcare students with course credit, offer the opportunity to apply theoretical learning in a culturally diverse work-based environment, and help students form realistic strategies for using their professional healthcare skills globally (Gower et al., 2017). Further, for students studying in disciplines such as nursing, nutrition, psychology,

or public health, these programs facilitate the development of the cultural competencies and global awareness (Greatrex-White, 2008) that are essential for future healthcare professionals working in a globally interconnected world. Learning abroad programs can also substantially improve a nursing student's future career prospects (Ulvund et al., 2022), build confidence, resourcefulness, and adaptability of occupational therapists (Davies et al., 2017), and improve intercultural and global competence in healthcare students (Potts, 2016). Unfortunately, not all healthcare students have the capacity or opportunity, due to personal or other circumstances, to travel overseas for an in-country LAP

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2024.106133>

Received 18 November 2023; Received in revised form 28 January 2024; Accepted 14 February 2024

Available online 19 February 2024

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(Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020), so they either miss out on this unique opportunity or they opt to participate in an alternative virtual program instead.

Confusingly, there are different terms used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe a LAP undertaken by HE students (Sherraden et al., 2013), such as study abroad, international learning experience, and international student mobility (Potts, 2016). For the purposes of this study, in-country LAPs are short-term (two to four week) programs where HE healthcare students travel to another country to apply their theoretical learning in a workplace context. On the other hand, a virtual learning abroad program (VLAP) involves a healthcare student engaging online with an overseas partner, rather than the student travelling to the country to engage in person (Upson and Bergiel, 2023). There are significant similarities between the virtual and in-country programs including that students enroll for academic credit in a specific unit/subject; apply their theoretical learning through engagement with an in-country partner located in a different cultural context and country; complete academic assessment items; and despite the increased flexibility with program timing, they must still complete the program within a prescribed period of time (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020; Upson and Bergiel, 2023). However, there are clear differences between the two programs that relate to the absence of international travel and accommodation related expenses for the virtual option (Universities UK International, 2022), which opens learning abroad opportunities to a broader and more diverse range of students, increasing their flexibility and reducing risk (Upson and Bergiel, 2023). In-country cultural immersion has been identified as critical for healthcare students, such as those studying nursing, to develop cultural competencies and enhanced global awareness (Cox et al., 2017), as well as extending their appreciation of their own attitudes to people from different backgrounds and cultures (Green et al., 2008). It is, however, the lack of in-country cultural immersion that is also a key difference between LAPs and VLAPs. There is scant literature focusing on virtual learning abroad programs (VLAPs) (Amerson, 2021; Upson and Bergiel, 2023) and therefore it is not known whether the virtual programs offer the same benefits to students as the in-country programs. Thus, it is critical more is known about how VLAPs impact the participating healthcare students.

Despite the differences, several countries aim to grow the number of students participating in both in-country and virtual LAPs (Institute of International Education, 2021; International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), 2022; Universities UK International, 2021). It seems prudent, therefore, to characterize the actual benefits students may gain from VLAPs, particularly if virtual programs are used as a direct alternative (not a replacement) to in-country programs. Hence, the aims of this study were to investigate and identify the benefits gained by HE healthcare students through their participation in a VLAP and compare these benefits to those identified in the literature for in-country programs.

2. Method

2.1. Study design

This qualitative study implemented a phenomenological epistemology (Smith et al., 2009) to explore the personal experience and sense-making of HE students who participated in a VLAP. This hermeneutic approach allows for a rigorous exploration of the experience and to develop an idiographic understanding of what participation in a VLAP means to each student (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008).

2.2. Ethics approval

The study was approved by the Committee for Ethics in Human Research at the [blinded] (project number [blinded]). Reporting was informed by the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research

(COREQ) checklist (Tong et al., 2007) as this is considered the most comprehensive reporting guideline for qualitative research and applies to research where data collection is conducted by interview (Walsh et al., 2020).

2.3. Participant selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a small number of Australian HE students who had completed a VLAP during 2021. At the time of their participation in the virtual program, the students were in the final year of their undergraduate healthcare studies. Permission to receive student contact details was sought from the Academic Unit Convenor Faculty-led LAPs in the lead researcher's home faculty. Four students provided their permission to the academic convenor to share their contact details with the lead researcher. All four students were contacted, and subsequently agreed to participate in an online semi-structured interview.

2.4. Data collection

To develop the interview guide (Table 1), previous examples of questions posed to learning abroad participants were examined and reviewed (Gaul, 2015; Pink et al., 2016; Underwood et al., 2016) with additional input from the entire research team to ensure the questions and language used were relevant to the aims of the study. The four students participated in one-on-one semi-structured online interviews at a time that was convenient to them. Prior to commencing each interview, all participants were provided with an opportunity to ask any questions regarding the interview process in addition to the overall purpose of the study.

The lead researcher conducted the interviews with the students between June and July 2021. Each interview was recorded with online video conferencing software (Microsoft Teams, ©Microsoft, Redmond, Washington, USA) with the ensuing transcripts checked for accuracy by the lead researcher. The duration of the interviews ranged between 37 and 61 min, with a mean of 45 min.

2.5. Data analysis

The interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to scrutinize the data. This approach allows for a focus on the participants' unique

Table 1

Questions for semi-structured online interviews with higher education students who participated in a virtual learning abroad program in 2021.

Demographic questions

1. Gender
2. Age range (prompts: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, >54 years)
3. Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?
4. What is your country of birth?
5. Is English your native language?
6. How many languages do you speak (other than English)?
7. Have you lived or travelled outside of Australia?
8. Have you previously travelled to the country where the VLAP was located?
9. What academic degree were you enrolled in when you participated in the VLAP?
10. Which VLAP did you participate in?

Virtual learning abroad questions

11. Why did you decide to participate in a VLAP?
12. Did you do any preparation prior to starting the VLAP?
13. What do you see as the main differences in your learning between the classroom and the VLAP?
14. How best can universities prepare students to understand the culture of the country where the VLAP is located?
15. Do you know what steps were undertaken to prepare the in-country partner for their participation in the VLAP?
16. What do you think are the main reasons an in-country partner decides to participate in a VLAP?
17. Is there any other information you wish to provide?

Key: VLAP = Virtual learning abroad program.

lived experience, and in this study, their perceptions of the benefits from participating in a VLAP (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). All members of the research team were sent the four verbatim interview transcripts in a single Microsoft Excel (Microsoft 365 MSO, version 2303) file to read after they had been checked for accuracy by the lead researcher. The lead researcher read and re-read each transcript multiple times, inserting their own explanatory notes each time. Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments were then made on each transcript to push the analysis to a more interpretative level (Smith et al., 2009). Following this thorough check of the transcripts, emergent themes were developed with connections being sought across each transcript. This process was repeated independently by a co-investigator of the research team in order to facilitate trustworthiness (Noble and Heale, 2019). The lead and co-investigator then met in person for three hours to discuss their emergent themes and to tentatively pull these together. Any discrepancies between the lead and co-investigator were discussed by presenting arguments for their interpretation. Consensus was always reached following this process. Lastly, a meeting was held with the entire research team where the final superordinate themes were decided on. This forum also served as an important means for data triangulation (Noble and Heale, 2019). Quotes embedded in the results were given a unique identifier comprising characters to first identify the participant and second to indicate the starting line from which the extract in question commenced. Thus, S1/L45 indicates that the quote was taken from student 1 and begins on line 45 of the transcript.

3. Results

The four healthcare students who participated in this study indicated they welcomed the opportunity to undertake a VLAP and believed they gained personal and professional benefits from their participation. They were particularly proud of their achievement in producing a ‘real product’ as an outcome of their participation, for an organization that was culturally different to the organizations in the country where they were studying. The real-world products produced by the students were the development of templates to be used by the in-country partner to apply for grant funding (S2, S4), strategies for communicating wellness messages to reduce non-communicable disease rates in the community (S3), and a booklet promoting healthy eating for women, with a special focus on healthy weight gain during pregnancy (S1). All students had previously travelled outside Australia, however, no student had travelled to the country where their in-country partner was located. See Table 2 for student demographic and program details.

All students expressed that their VLAP contributed to authentic learning. Students indicated they drew on, developed, and expanded their professional knowledge and skills to develop and deliver a project for their in-country partner, as described by the following student:

I did a project with them and that project involves the template for grant

Table 2
Virtual learning abroad student participant demographic and program details.

Characteristic	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
Age range (years)	25–34	35–44	25–34	35–44
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin	N	N	N	N
Country of birth	Australia	Philippines	Kenya	China
Native language English	Y	N	N	N
Languages spoken other than English	0	1	3	1
Country of virtual learning abroad program	Tonga	Fiji	Fiji	Fiji
Discipline area of bachelor’s degree	Human Nutrition	Psychology	Public Health	Public Health
Program organizer	In-country partner	TPP	TPP	TPP

Key: Y = Yes; N = No; TPP = Third-party provider.

proposal, the calculation for monitoring their budget, the actual budget and the timeframe or the timeline to use the GANTT charts. (S2/L71).

Furthermore, students believed that having completed the project would positively impact future professional employment prospects by making their curriculum vitae stand out from those of other applicants, with two students indicating:

The most valuable [aspect] from this intern[ship].....led me to know more about myself and like it [will] contribute more to my future career. (S4/L387).

In terms of maybe sort of career progression, I’m thinking of this for myself. (S1/L365).

Nevertheless, students were aware that to gain maximum benefit from a VLAP it was necessary for them to be culturally prepared in advance of engaging with people from the country where their in-country partner was located, as acknowledged by the following students:

For me...the cultural background needs to come first so that your project will be sustainable because it touches their value...rather than...not knowing anything about them and just assume that [what I do] will work. (S2/L46).

In healthcare we work directly with people so...if you have a more understanding of others and different things, different opinions then that’s gonna [to] be [of] value to you. (S1/L359).

Despite the students emphasizing the importance of their own preparation prior to engaging with people from a cultural background different to their own, no student had any knowledge about or interest in whether there was any cultural preparation for the in-country partners, as highlighted by the following student:

No, I have no idea to be honest. (S2/L134).

Background cultural preparation for the VLAP prior to commencement of their engagement online with their in-country partner contributed to students’ overall professional growth and development. However, students appeared somewhat surprised that through this one program they could learn not only about the culture of the in-country partner and the country in which the partner was located, but also about themselves, as indicated by the following students:

The most valuable from this intern[ship]...is just like you, you try to know yourself again. (S4/L382).

You’re in a completely new environment, it kind of helps you be more open to other things in general and think more differently to what you otherwise would if you’re just in your mundane, normal environment. (S1/L371).

Continuing this idea of self-growth and development, it was evident that throughout their virtual learning journey the students’ faith in themselves grew. For many, it was about the cultivation of ‘self’ with the following student acknowledging:

[VLAPs] create that sense of...I can say...independence and confidence in yourself. (S3/L198).

This personal growth provided the students with the confidence to use their professional skills such as time management, in addition to showcasing their written and oral communication abilities, while fulfilling existing personal and professional commitments, as described by one student:

It’s really, well, because I work, I work full-time and I’m studying, and I have a family, so I think it’s the best thing that attracts me most is I can do it in my own time. (S2/L33).

All the programs the students were involved in resulted in a real-world product as a tangible outcome, rather than production of a hypothetical outcome or ‘product’ without any real-world application. The students described this outcome as one of the more positive aspects of their VLAP, particularly as they needed to use their skills, knowledge, and experience into producing something that may be helpful to and used by their in-country partner.

It was actually producing something that was going to be used over in Tonga and used by the Ministry of Health...as opposed to just trying to enhance my own learning. (S1/L220).

So, it’s all about sustainability. So, you have to make sure that the project you’re doing with is actually touches their values and their culture. (S2/L47).

The pride described by the students in producing something that may be helpful to their in-country partner and the partner's broader community, was expanded by one student who indicated they welcomed the possibility of providing future professional expertise to their in-country partner, as described by the following student:

They asked if they need some further help, they can write to me and maybe I contribute to further research to them. (S4/L464).

However, neither the potential for future professional contributions to their in-country partner nor the pride they expressed in producing a 'real product' resulted in the students being interested in whether their existing contribution was appropriate for its intended purpose over either the short- or long-term, as expressed by the following students:

It's like you just finish your assessment and that's it. (S3/L349).

It's like having a product, it absolutely blow their mind...after the preparation and after, what you call this after you have presented that to them, give them away. (S2/L217).

The three programs that were organized by a third-party provider offered students an additional opportunity to engage and connect, not just with people associated with the in-country partner organization, but also with other HE students from around the world. While each student completed their chosen project for their specific in-country partner individually, they valued the opportunity to network with other students who were completing other programs, as described by the following student:

I found it throughout my journey, talking to different people, different personalities and meeting people from different nations. Because [third-party provider name] has a wide range of students, so from the UK to Canada so to India. So, it's quite [a] range, [a] variety of people. So, you feel free interacting with different people. (S3/L203).

The students acknowledged that VLAPs provided them with the opportunity to connect with a range of people living outside Australia. However, the students were aware that for a truly authentic cultural experience, it would be preferable, if not essential, to meet the people in person (face-to-face) and experience the culture first-hand by immersing themselves in it.

It would be better if you come to Fiji and know their culture and experience their customs, it would be great. You would understand more and maybe you can do this project even better. (S4/L314).

It's one thing to kind of hear about it, it's another thing to really be immersed in it, um talk to the people, and hear first-hand their experiences living there, and what their lives are like, what their um experiences being in the health system are like and how that differs to Australia. (S1/L210).

The experience of a VLAP provided all of the students with what could be described as a closure to their university studies or an end of degree project and the start of the next phase of their professional career. A kind of 'end of degree exit project' or assessment that confirms the competency and professional skills of students prior to starting their professional healthcare careers. When acknowledging this transition from student to healthcare professional, there was a greater apparent respect for and appreciation of all their prior learning, as acknowledged by the following students:

Being on a virtual internship, actually I saw myself interested in knowledge I did in my first year...So, all this knowledge that we ah like acquire in school they can be [of] interest in some ways. So, I think it is a good way of closing [the] chapter of the uni[versity]. (S3/L351).

From this experience...I will [be] connecting my learning, my previous learning. (S4/L290).

Overall, the students were well-meaning and appeared confident in their assumption that being from a resource rich country enabled them to effectively help an in-country partner from a resource poor country. The students expressed a sense of pity for the situations faced by their in-country partners and as a result were confident that any assistance provided was indeed helpful, as acknowledged by the following students:

But just that idea that like not everyone has access to healthcare, and just the, you know, lack of facilities, that can also be quite striking. (S1/L139).

I was really, well not really shocked, but I was really sad when I did all this research about them and specially what's going on [and] that's where really I was like, you know, really happy I could help in some way. (S2/L131).

The students were, however, somewhat oblivious to any apparent risks that might have existed for the in-country partners as a consequence of the virtual program, with one student indicating:

They are under-resourced and so having extra hands on deck could be a real positive for them. (S1/L274).

4. Discussion

Virtual learning abroad programs provide healthcare students with a range of personal and professional benefits, a cognitive shift in how they perceive themselves, as well as with a positive and transformative learning experience. Virtual programs enhanced the students' future professional healthcare employment prospects, increased their confidence that they will achieve their professional learning goals, and provided them with an opportunity for self-growth. These findings are similar to the benefits that students gain through an in-country LAP (Bretag and van der Veen, 2017; Potts, 2016) and demonstrates that VLAPs provide some of the benefits that students gain from in-country programs.

The intention of work-integrated programs, such as learning abroad, are to provide students with an opportunity to develop confidence in their professional abilities (Weldon and Ngo, 2019). Crucial to building this confidence are the academic staff who provide the contextual framework for the students to observe and reflect on their contributions throughout the program, essential dimensions in experiential learning programs (Kolb, 2015) such as LAPs. The need for students to draw on their academic learning and contribute their professional expertise appears to have resulted in more than growing confidence in their professional healthcare abilities, it facilitated a cognitive shift in how the students perceived themselves. The students commenced the VLAP as a final year undergraduate healthcare student. By the end of the program, and possibly for the first time, the students were thinking of themselves as future healthcare professionals with expertise to contribute to the broader community. Being cognitively challenged by a LAP is one of the identified benefits of in-country experiences (International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), 2022). The cognitive shift in how the students perceive themselves represents a valuable outcome from their participation in a VLAP, and an important expansion of understanding the benefits of these programs.

Learning abroad programs give students exposure to real professional, work, or practice environments (Cameron et al., 2018). The four students in our study were exposed to a real-world professional work environment, albeit virtually, and they had an additional opportunity to individually complete a project designed by, and for, an in-country partner located in another country with a culture different to their own. The completion of this project represents a subtle but important distinction between the benefits gained from a VLAP compared to those gained through an in-country program. This outcome provided the in-country partner with a concrete and positive outcome from their involvement in the virtual program. This contrasts with the existing literature on in-country programs where there are concerns that in-country partners may be unintentionally harmed by their involvement in LAPs (Crabtree, 2013; Hartman et al., 2018), or worse, that there is no consideration of the impact on in-country partners (Kosman et al., 2021).

This study found that while the students connected with people who were culturally different to them, this connection did not immediately translate into the students gaining greater intercultural or global competencies, one of the specific intended outcomes of in-country LAPs (Fisher et al., 2023; Tran and Vu, 2018). The students certainly indicated that they gained a greater sense of 'self' through their participation in the virtual program. However, it is concerning that they believe any

assistance they could provide to a resource poor country could only be of benefit to that country. This perception reinforces the idea that appropriate and effective preparation is needed not only for in-country programs (Schroeder et al., 2009), but also for virtual programs to mitigate this potential for normalizing paternalistic or colonial overtones (Crabtree, 2013). There is recognition that in-country experiences involving HE healthcare students could potentially raise ethical challenges for the in-country partners (Crump et al., 2010). Hence, HE institutions should enhance the preparation they provide to focus on the student's mindset and motivations prior to the student's participation in a VLAP. Future VLAPs should include more direct cultural interactions, by involving a range of representatives of the in-country partner to both foster the students' respect for these partners and improve their cultural awareness. Students would then have a greater opportunity to directly experience engaging with culturally diverse people and thus enhance their global and intercultural competencies.

5. Implications for future virtual learning abroad programs

This study raises several questions around the offering of VLAPs and the benefits they provide to healthcare students. Should virtual programs be offered and promoted as providing a direct alternative (rather than a replacement) to in-country LAPs? How should virtual programs be designed to provide students with benefits comparable to those gained from in-country programs? Is it even necessary for the two programs to provide students with comparable benefits? And finally, how should HE institutions market VLAPs if they are not completely comparable to in-country programs? Answering this myriad of questions around these virtual programs will provide a clearer picture of how these programs benefit healthcare students in disciplines such as psychology, nutrition, public health, and nursing, information of critical importance to HE institutions and program leaders alike.

Limitations to the current study include the paucity of existing research on VLAPs and the differing definitions as to what constitutes a VLAP (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020; Upson and Bergiel, 2023). The sample size was small, although analyzing the data through the interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2009), allowed for a rigorous exploration of the idiographic subjective experiences of each of the virtual learning abroad participants (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008) so that meaning could be made of each student's individual sense-making.

6. Conclusion

The offering of VLAPs was a judicious and practical response to the travel restrictions that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic. By exploring the benefits students gain through these virtual programs, we can now go some way to answering the question of whether the benefits gained through VLAPs can be considered comparable to the benefits gained through in-country LAPs. We report that the healthcare students welcome the opportunity to participate in a virtual program, especially as it does not involve the same risks, costs, or inflexibility as the in-country LAPs. Students are particularly proud of producing a 'real product' that could be used by their in-country partner and believe they have enhanced their future healthcare careers. Further, they experience a cognitive shift in how they perceive themselves as a consequence of completing the virtual program. Healthcare disciplines could adopt these programs as an alternative to LAPs, however, further research is warranted to ascertain how applicable these findings are to other disciplines such as nursing, occupational therapy, or physiotherapy.

Despite HE institutions seeing VLAPs as a viable alternative (equivalent to in-country programs), the development of the students' intercultural and global competencies is less clear. This difference in the competencies gained between the two programs, virtual and in-country, suggests that HE institutions should be mindful of what they promote as the benefits of virtual programs and whether they should be promoted as

comparable to in-country LAPs. Further research exploring different types of VLAPs would provide greater guidance to institutions about their design and development.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bronwyn A. Kosman: Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Daniela Castro de Jong:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis. **Catherine R. Knight-Agarwal:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Lucy S. Chipchase:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis. **Narora Etxebarria:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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