

## **A perspective on third-party providers and study tour programs: A mixed method study**

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This article presents an evaluation research outcome that used a mixed method approach. The study evaluated a short-term, study tour unit that was offered as an elective, credit-bearing, work-integrated learning experience for second year undergraduate students at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. The unit of study offered students up to five different international destinations (India, China, Philippines, Samoa and Malaysia) from 2014-2017. The evaluation research project focused on participants' perceptions of working with third-party providers when undertaking a study tour program. The results from the study helped the authors to highlight the complexities around the implementation of an inclusive and collaborative process that is often required when co-developing a short-term, study tour program for multi-disciplinary student cohorts at a university-wide level. A main outcome from the study was the development of a set of recommendations for university study tour staff who find themselves operating in similar contexts. The recommendations highlight some practical solutions for providing avenues for the integration of an inclusive approach when developing a study tour program with third-party providers.

### **Introduction**

Students require international knowledge and experience to be highly competitive for local and global job markets (Daly & Barker, 2005; Knutson & Gonzalez, 2016; Koernig, 2007; Marklein, 2003). There is extensive graduate employment competition that is fuelled by the continual realisation that a university undergraduate degree is only the beginning for entering one's chosen career path. Students who take part in short-term, international experiences to help develop their international business knowledge, global awareness and intercultural understanding (and during their undergraduate university studies) tend to increase their marketability, providing an advantage over competition (Daly & Barker, 2005). Additionally, these types of learning experiences improve students' reflective orientation to life experience (Kearney, Perkins & Maakrun, 2014).

Often, students choose an educational institution based on its capacity to provide short-term, international and experiential learning opportunities that focus on global employability skill development for job-readiness (Koernig, 2007; Marklein, 1999). Since the late 1990s, affordable, short-term, international study tours, which allow for flexible delivery modes have seen a dramatic increase in enrolment numbers (Daly & Barker, 2005; Hains-Wesson, 2017; Koernig, 2007). For instance, the Australian Government supports such initiatives, offering student grants, including the OS-HELP loan program that was introduced in 2004, the *Study Overseas* website, the *World Class Campaign*, the *Asia Abroad* and *New Colombo Plan* to name just a few (Livingstone, 2003; Potts, 2016).

However, developing high-quality, short-term international study tour programs that focus on work-integrated learning outcomes is often fraught with difficulties (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Gordon & Smith, 1992; Hains-Wesson, 2017; Shumilova, Cai & Pekkola, 2012). For example, there are concerns around what might constitute a high-quality, short-term study tour program, and in the areas of: 1) academic rigour for developing students' global mindsets and international discipline knowledge for job-readiness; 2) providing industry-linked projects and short-term internships; and 3) the utilisation of third-party providers (TPP) to help co-develop (and deliver) study tour programs that adhere to risk and quality assurance standards (Hains-Wesson, 2017).

Malicki (2013) provided a list of 22 TPP organisations, characterised as follows:

These providers most commonly are offering volunteering and internship opportunities, although academic short courses, clinical placements and language options are also represented. (p. 6)

Given the many challenges, and more specifically, the increasing popularity of utilising third-party providers within the study tour landscape for the higher education sector, certain questions arise, such as how do we best collaborate across expertise to provide high-quality, short-term international study tour programs for students? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with TPP when co-developing and/or co-delivering short-term, study tour programs that include a work-integrated learning component? Therefore, one of the main purposes of the study was to critically investigate such questions by completing an evaluation research analysis that used a mixed method approach. Essentially, we desired a method, which would enable us to investigate the issues, challenges and the benefits of co-developing a university-wide, study tour program that contracted multiple TPP for several international destinations. Second, we aimed to develop a high-quality, short-term study tour program that involved the securing of short-term, international work-integrated learning opportunities for our students. Subsequently, we were keenly aware that the utilisation of TPP was going to be a key benefit for achieving such goals. We therefore anticipated that the mixed method approach would help us to determine what might constitute an effective way of working with TPP, while keeping in mind students' views on such matters.

## **Defining short-term study tours**

For this study, it was important to define the term *short-term study tour*, because it minimised misunderstanding and provided familiarity. Additionally, according to the literature, the term *short-term study tour* is often difficult to define due to the different terms being used in similar contexts of operation such as study abroad, study exchange, industry tours, service learning, and mobility (Gonsalvez, 2013; Potts, 2016). Therefore, for this study we define the term as having specific characteristics, which Gonsalvez (2013) stated as:

...[a] duration of less than one month, field expertise and knowledge of the culture and society of the country that is being visited by the lead faculty member [and/or TPP], and student immersion into the culture that results in a gainful learning experience. (p. 1)

We also position that a short-term, international study tour program which includes industry-linked projects and/or short-term internships is a form of *work-integrated learning* (Ballestas & Roller, 2013; Hutchings, Jackson & McEllister, 2002; Kolb, 2014).

## Literature review

In the 1980s and 1990s, the research on study tours began with a focus on language acquisition. However, it quickly expanded to include cultural learning, personal developmental and research outcomes. More recently, this particular research area has started to investigate the learning impact of students who take part in study tours around cultural awareness, global citizenship and the development of transferable employability skills for job-readiness (Ballestas & Roller, 2013; Bennett, 1986; Lang, Cacciattolo & Kidman, 2016; Porth, 1997; Tucker, 1997). Although, this field has advanced considerably since the 1980s, research around study tours as a specific work-integrated learning option is still modest. Also, there is little research being conducted in the area of TPP within this field, despite the increased use of TPP (Lang, Cacciattolo & Kidman, 2016). The various research that has been conducted in this area is mostly concentrated on the importance of professional, personal growth and students' learning outcomes (Bennett, 1986; Daly & Barker, 2005; Kearney, Perkins & Maakrun, 2014; Knutson & Gonzalez, 2016; Koernig, 2007; Marklein, 2003). There have been modest empirical studies that investigate the collaborative experiences amongst TPP, university teachers, students and study tour staff, for example. This study is therefore timely, because it focuses on illustrating how we worked towards the co-development of a short-term, international work-integrated learning study tour program with TPP. We achieved this by completing regular critical friends' meetings, documenting our reflections on practice and its theory as well as inviting a number of participants to voice their ideas, concerns and personal perceptions on what they believed represented an effective and inclusive collaborative process. The participants of the study included the authors of this paper (n=2), TPP (n=5), students (n=94) and university study tour staff (n=5). The research question that guided the investigation was:

What are the key recommendations for effective and inclusive collaboration amongst TPP, university teachers, students and university study tour staff to create a high-quality, short-term study tour program for work-integrated learning?

## Background

The study tour program was titled *Industry Study Tours* (Swinburne University, 2017). It was an elective unit that was open to all undergraduate students across the university. It was centrally delivered, and operated during out-of-semester timings such as intensive winter or summer teaching terms. The program offered multiple destinations with students travelling as a single group with an academic facilitator and a TPP representative. Access

to the Internet was often dependent on the location while in-country, but it was mostly reliable and available. Due to the program being a university-wide unit of study, the unit learning outcomes, assessment requirements, teaching team, university study tour support staff as well as the online learning management system remained the same (from 2014-2017). The main curriculum differences were: 1) the number of students taking part, 2) gender 3) students' low-socio-economic backgrounds, 4) disciplines, 5) international destinations, 6) short-term work-integrated learning opportunities and 7) the TPP (see Table 1 for more detail). The University's enrolment statistics for 2015 (at the time of this study) showed University-wide full-time females at 48%, and full-time males at 52%. However, the university's mature-aged student percentage breakdown was not taken into consideration, so there could be a 2% variation on either side of the female and male enrolment statistical percentages which are presented in Table 1. Overall, students who participated in the program were at the following year levels: 32% first year, 28% second year, 40% third year; whilst 90% of the student cohort were from low-socio-economic status; with 20% of students stating that they had never travelled overseas before.

Table 1: Industry Study Tours (2014-2017)

Year	Destination	No. of students	Delivery mode	Female	Male	Mature aged	Under 25 years
2014	India	23	Summer intensive	54%	46%	8.7%	91.3%
2015/16	China	47	Winter intensive	52%	48%	6.4%	93.6%
2016/17	Philippines	16	Summer intensive	56.3%	43.7%	12.5%	87.5%
2016	Samoa	10	Winter intensive	80%	20%	20%	80%
2016/17	Malaysia	18	Winter and Summer intensive	50%	50%	5.6%	94.4%
Total		114		58.4%	41.6%	10.63%	89.37%

\* Summer intensive = 2-6 weeks; Winter intensive = 2-6 weeks

In order to understand the range of international, work-integrated learning opportunities that each destination offered for students we present a *Study Tour Work-Integrated Learning Typology* (Figure 1). This was developed by adapting the *Non-Placement Work-Integrated Learning Typology* created by Kaider and Hains-Wesson (2015). This particular typology was tested and validated for a variety of work-integrated learning research projects funded by the Australian Collaborative Education Network (<http://acen.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Enhancing-Courses-for-Employability.pdf>). The image presented in Figure 1 highlights the various formative and summative learning requirements that students undertook during their international component of the study tour program. No two study tours were the same (in-country learning) due to each destination incorporating a variety of different industry-linked and/or short-term internship engagements. For example, in Figure 1, the placement of the triangle symbol within the *Study Tour Work-Integrated Learning Typology* depicts the program's in-country work-integrated learning experiences for India, China and Samoa, whereas, the square symbol depicts the in-country work-integrated learning experiences for Philippines and Malaysia.

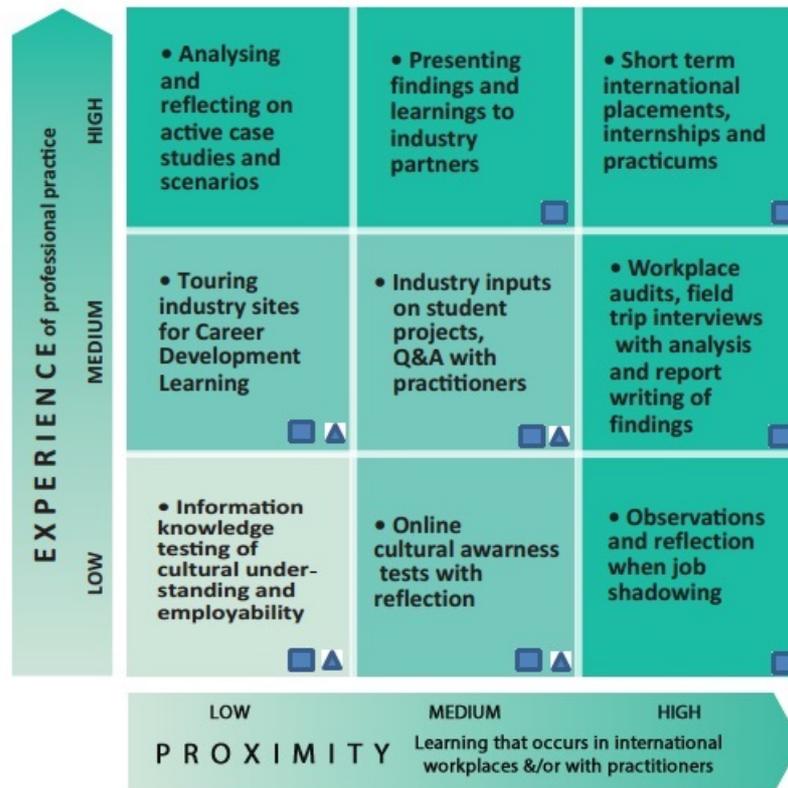


Figure 1: A study tour work-integrated learning typology (adapted from Kaider & Hains-Wesson, 2015).

Overall, the program centred on providing students with the prospect to evidence and thus measure their employability skill development for job-readiness. This was a key focus of the study tour no matter what the experience level and/or proximity to the workplace and/or with practitioners when undergoing the in-country industry engagement. For students to achieve this, the following key experiential curriculum characteristics were used:

- Kolb's (2014) experiential learning characteristics (reflection, emotive, theory and experience);
- Employability focused learning outcomes that were aligned to the assessments for evidencing, curating and measuring students' global mindset;
- International, industry-based engagement opportunities, which might include short-term, unpaid internships.

Additionally, the key rationale for the program was to: a) provide students with a transformative experience which developed a broad range of employability skills and attributes required to excel in a competitive globalised 21st century economy, b) provide

students with a multi-disciplinary professional practice opportunity in an international work context that would enable students to make a positive contribution to a project in the sojourning country and/or while completing a short-term internship and c) provide students with the opportunity to constructively analyse the process of their global experience for the purpose of educating and informing self and others through reflective practice.

The program's unit learning outcomes and assessment criteria were developed by referring to the literature on *best practice* for study tour learning frameworks. For instance, Porth (1997), Tucker (1997) and Jones, Burden, Layne and Stein's (1992) research in this area was highly influential. Porth (1997) and Tucker (1997) defined the essence of an effective study tour as one that offers both classroom learning and hands-on experience in an international setting. They proposed (as well as Jones et al., 1992) a three-phase model that included: 1) pre-departure; 2) in-country; and 3) re-entry. A study tour framework that integrates flexible delivery modes such as face to face, online and blended learning for independent learning (Beattie & James, 1997) was also considered. Moreover, Hutchings, Jackson and McEllister's (2002) suggestions about providing students with the opportunity to maximise learning around tolerance and ambiguity, being open-minded, having empathy, being adaptable and flexible, understanding stress and how to manage it effectively alongside conflict resolution tactics were also highly valuable when developing the program. For example, Table 2 depicts the assessments that were used to measure students' learning for each unit learning outcome, which was purposely aligned to Kolb's (2014) experiential learning framework.

Table 2: Curriculum details

Unit learning outcomes	Assessment criteria	How the assessments were implemented	WIL outcome
1. Interpret prospective global experiences and challenges that are linked to theoretical knowledge which advances the understanding of discipline-specific job-readiness.	<b>Assessment 1:</b> A project proposal (750-1000 words) that focuses on projected international learning, students' personal and professional development and integrating theory with practice (worth 15%).	<b>Assessment 1:</b> During pre-departure preparation to allow students the opportunity to prepare for their international experience by completing research and to problem solve potential issues prior to arrival when working on projects or completing an internship.	Kolb's 2014 reflective component.
2. Share intellectual independence and creative skills to provide an account of the challenges and problems encountered while working in a global context for job-readiness.	<b>Assessment 2(a):</b> A group oral presentation (7-5 minutes) on project learnings that have occurred internationally and students' particular employability skill development area/outcome (worth 15%).	<b>Assessment 2(a):</b> During the international experience to allow students to report back on their learning to industry study tour staff TPP. Allows students to gain feedback for improving practice.	Kolb's 2014 theory and experience component.

	<b>Assessment 2(b):</b> A reflective summary (750 words) on one incident and an employability skill development area that helped students to improve practice with clear reference to credible research (worth 10%).	<b>Assessment 2(b):</b> During the re-entry phase to document key learning and an incident that occurred during the international learning experience.	Kolb's 2014 emotive component.
3. Summarise experience/s that focuses on theory informing practice and practice informing theory via the benefits of working within an international and multi-discipline context.	<b>Assessment 3:</b> A choice between an artefact and a reflective component (600 words) or a reflective essay (2500 words) that documents the overall learning and professional experience, industry engagements while illustrating the integration of theory into practice for improvement of practice and self-awareness as a professional (50%).	<b>Assessment 3:</b> During the re-entry phase to provide students with the opportunity to create, develop and reflect on project outcomes or internship learning experiences.	Kolb's 2014 reflection, emotive, theory and experience.
4. Frame the unit's learning outcomes and study expectations for effective pre-departure, international experience and re-entry participation.	<b>Pre-departure:</b> A one day, face-to-face workshop that covers ground rules, international learning expectations, health, well-being, assessment processes, cultural awareness and theory, language, conflict resolution, teamwork and working in multi-disciplinary teams (5%).	<b>Pre-departure:</b> During pre-departure preparation phase in order to allow students the opportunity to prepare for their international experience.	Kolb's 2014 reflection component.
	<b>Re-entry:</b> A one day, face-to-face workshop that focuses on sharing experiences and stories for job-readiness, debriefing for challenging moments, articulating employability stories and an opportunity to evaluate the program as a part of students' professional practice (5%).	<b>Re-entry:</b> During post-learning phase in order to allow students the opportunity to debrief and share experience with peers and the university.	Kolb's 2014 reflection component

### Selection process

The student selection process was based on students submitting a 250-word reflection on why they wanted to complete the short-term, study tour program and why they would make an excellent University ambassador. Students' grade point average scores were also

reviewed. At times, the teaching team (n=2) completed a telephone or a face to face interview with any potentially at-risk students to ascertain student's suitability for the program. Once selection was finalised, students' details were sent to the Counselling and Access Ability service units. This is a University requirement to assist with highlighting any students who had registered with the service for potential well-being management requirements. Students (no matter their destination) received and undertook similar preparation and re-entry learning.

## **Learning framework**

There were three phases of online learning expected to be covered pre-, during and post- the short-term international experience. This was completed via the University's learning management system (online). The three phases aligned to the unit's learning outcomes and assessment criteria. When the country of destination's Internet service was inadequate, hardcopy information was provided to students. Overall, the online learning environment offered self-directed, supportive learning resources and rubrics for the two face to face workshops and the three major assessments. Students who studied wholly online were offered an alternative pre-departure and re-entry workshop (online) and this was created and managed via a case by case basis. For instance, an online student submitted a reflective story to be published on the program's blog [<http://www.industrystudytour.swinburne.com>] and completed a set of online tasks. The program provided a blended learning approach for the pre-, during and post- international learning component that incorporated: 10 online learning activities, between 5-10 content site reviews, numerous presentations, 5 cultural activities, and 3 reflective practice resources. The pre-departure and re-entry workshops were created in line with the research on effective study tour program development. For instance, it has been noted that one should include and acknowledge "diversity, organising information according to stereotypes, posing questions to challenge stereotypes, analysing communication episodes and generating other culture messages" (Beamer, 1992, p. 290).

Once the learning and teaching framework was finalised, we employed a number of TPP who allocated a facilitator for each destination. The TPP focus was to assist the teaching team to establish, operationalise and facilitate the learning component pre- and during the in-country experience. Whereas, the University's study tour staff assisted with the program's risk assessment, management, marketing and logistical preparation, and prior to the in-country component occurring.

## **Methodology**

An auto-ethnographical methodology was chosen for this study's main philosophical underpinning. We decided on this approach, because it allowed us to systematically examine our teaching practice, and to aid in understanding the intricacies of working across expertise (Hains-Wesson & Tytler, 2015; Hains-Wesson & Young, 2017). We also required a methodology that would allow for the collection and analysis of a variety of mixed method data generated processes, which could be systematically repeated. This

methodological approach allowed us to undertake a continual refinement of the program, and during its operation. It also allowed us to pin-point collaboration opportunities and barriers when working with TPP and across expertise from multiple viewpoints. Ethics clearance was obtained from Swinburne University and all data was rendered anonymous (SHR Project 2015/284).

In the following section, we display the different methods used, and how each method was employed.

## **Methods**

### **Critical friends' meeting**

We facilitated regular critical friends' meetings that were recorded. We were the only ones who took part in these meetings. Prior to each meeting, we provided one another with reflective notes of the previous meeting and notes post-meetings. The meetings occurred fortnightly via face to face, and for a twelve-month period. We uploaded the recorded meetings to a secure, password protected online storage platform. We transcribed the recorded meetings along with the reflective summaries (pre- and post-meetings), and on a monthly basis. This process allowed us to regularly check for minor editing and to highlight any pertinent findings. The recordings were transcribed onto *Word* documents for thematic analysis using *NVivo*.

### **Pawing through the literature**

Prior to each critical friends' meetings, we presented summary findings from 2-3 peer reviewed journal articles (n=50) that focused on short-term, study tour (international) work-integrated learning experiences or working with third-party providers (TPP). This process allowed us to continually reflect upon our teaching practice, but more specifically in relation to the literature findings, to help improve the program while working across expertise.

### **Third-party provider's online survey**

We developed and implemented an open and closed online survey to assist in eliciting responses from third-party providers (n=5) and University study tour staff (n=5). The survey construction was influenced by the findings from the critical friends' meetings, the pawing through the literature and our continual reflective analysis of our teaching practice. We list the key survey questions below:

1. What is your main responsibility for the Industry Study Tours?
2. How long have you been operating in this position?
3. Which of the following responses best describes your initial involvement in the Industry Study Tours program? 1) a networking opportunity; 2) to learn more about how universities run study tour programs; 3) to enhance expertise; 4) to increase experiences, economic advantages; 5) interested in the learning and teaching aspect;

- 6) to work with students more; 7) to work with like-minded people; and 8) any other comments.
4. Have you travelled/live/lived overseas? (If yes), how often, how recent, how long and in which countries?
  5. Are there any personal insights that you have discovered about yourself upon being involved in an Industry Study Tours, such as the international experience with university students?
  6. At this stage, do you have any concerns about taking part in an Industry Study Tours' international experience in the future?
  7. What are some of things that the teaching team could do to help you prepare for taking part in the international experience with students?
  8. What do you feel are some of the major concerns about being a study tour leader as part of the Industry Study Tours?
  9. What do you feel are some of the major benefits about being a study tour leader as part of the Industry Study Tours?
  10. What would be the most important piece of advice that you would give others when they are leading/supporting an international experience as part of a study tour?
  11. How do you feel about the effectiveness of the Industry Study Tours' preparation process for getting students ready for their international experience?
  12. Can you please list the five most important aspects that you believe a preparation program for an international experience should consist of?
  13. What response would best describe your feelings about your expertise when delivering/supporting an international experience for students about the following: employability skill development such as enhancing cultural awareness, teamwork and/or global citizenship?

### **Student interviews**

Students participated in an audio recorded, focus group discussion. The interviews were facilitated by a study tour staff member who was not a part of the research team, to adhere to ethics requirements. Ninety-four students took part in the group discussions via six groups. In the interviews, students were invited to openly express their opinions, perceptions and their personal insight on the benefits, challenges and/or improvements required when working with third-party providers (TPP). Due to the limitation of the word count, only the data collected, analysed and displayed for this study's research question is presented. It is also important to note that students who completed the China program, mainly toured and visited non-government organisations (NGOs) in Beijing and Shanghai, listened to industry experts before asking group-based crafted questions, and completed industry-linked, problem solving presentations. We would therefore term this type of study tour experience as a lower level of work-integrated learning according to the typology presented earlier. Whereas, students who completed the Philippines program visited NGOs but they also undertook a ten-day internship component, working with social enterprise organisations at the Gawad Kalinga [<http://www.gk1world.com/home>] Enchanted Farm. They also assisted social enterprise organisations with participating in the annual Business Summit at the Enchanted Farm [<http://www.socialbusinesssummit.net/2017>]. We would therefore classify this type of experience as a higher level

of work-integrated learning according to the typology that was presented earlier. To cluster the responses coherently due to the different levels of the work-integrated learning experiences that occurred for each destination, we present the following seven areas that were regularly covered by students in the interviews:

1. Concerns about taking part in the Industry Study Tour.
2. Concerns about being overseas with the TPP.
3. Concerns about being overseas with the university teacher/s.
4. Providing advice to other students when completing a short-term, study tour program.
5. Providing advice to other students when working/learning with TPP?
6. Providing opinions of the effectiveness of the TPP in preparing them for the international experience.
7. Providing opinions as to how the university and the TPP could work better together for improving the program.

Upon completion of the focus group interviews, a research assistant transcribed the recordings into *Word* documents. The data was rendered anonymous to adhere to ethics requirements. Thematic analysis was completed using *NVivo*.

### **Data analysis**

Data was collected and stored into password protected online files. This included personal reflections from the authors and summary notes from the critical friends' meetings. We also kept a log of relevant literature with brief summaries. A two-phase pattern of data analysis was completed. This was conducted upon all data collected to minimise personal and/or intuitive viewpoints that could influence the discoveries. The first phase focused on the analysis of the qualitative results. Data was only viewed as beneficial when a piece of information aligned with the research question. The data generation and continual critical analysis aided in responding to problems of practice and pin-pointing specific types of themes, which led to the discovery of ways to improve the program and how to best work with TPP across expertise. The second phase involved an additional review of the data as a collective whole in terms of reflections, feedback, and our notes from the critical friends' meetings. We repeated the thematic analysis to be objective and retrospective. We found that thematic analysis was useful as a form of pattern recognition, a technique involving searching through the data for emerging themes. The data was reviewed line by line to identify recurring patterns, which formed our overall perspective. We then reviewed the quantitative data alongside the thematic analysis before reaching final consensus.

In the following section, we position the data results in accordance with each method used. First, we present the online survey results that were gained from the TPP and university study tour staff. We discovered that three key themes emerged: 1) working with like-minded people; 2) working with students; and 3) preparing students. Subsequently, this led us to summarise the findings into key recommendations, which we present in Table 3. Second, we present the findings from the student focus group interviews. We

discovered that three main themes emerged from the analysis, which were: 1) what is important to students; 2) learning alongside TPP; and 3) improving the program.

## **Data results**

### **Third-party providers and University study tour staff experts: Online survey results**

#### *Working with like-minded people*

A total of five TPP participants and five University study tour staff responded to the survey. We purposely do not name the TPP or the University study tour staff members here, to conform with ethics requirements.

The TPP participants had extensive experience travelling and with supporting University study tour staff. The TPP participants also stated that they had backgrounds as either NGO company consultants, were directors or had experience with being professional tour consultants prior to taking up a position as a university TPP. The majority of TPP participants' foci for being involved in the program were mostly strategic. For instance, the TPP participants desired to work with like-minded people, provide industry connections and work-integrated learning options as well as to collaborate across expertise. As one TPP participant stated: "To apply current University education to the real world setting" (TPP for Samoa, 2016). Another TPP participant suggested that they were "...interested in the learning and teaching aspect" and "to know more about Australian leader students' vision and help [the University] to develop future entrepreneurship programs" (TPP for China, 2016). Whereas, the University study tour staff suggested that they were mostly experienced in supporting the delivery of University study tour programs. They also expressed how they enjoyed working for the University's Industry Study Tour program, because of its central delivery framework and its complexity around the multiple destination that occurred each year. As one university study tour staff person expressed it by saying:

As coordinator, taking responsibility and working with Industry Study Tours' students may be different to working with other mobility [study tour] groups. Each group usually has its own culture; however, Industry Study Tour group members (students and staff) will come from varied backgrounds with a range of expectations.

#### *Working with students*

Participants expressed joy towards being involved with the program. For instance, being a witness to students' employability learning and over time. As one University study tour staff member suggested:

Confidence in students and their ability to see their potential a year or 2 after they have travelled is a key to success of a study tour. This change is not necessarily immediate from returning home after their Industry Study Tour. But a year or two down the track, through keeping in contact with the students and seeing what they are up to, and discussing the trip post re-entry.

The TPP participants felt that some of the major benefits about being a study tour leader was when they received feedback from students, so that they could “make contributions to the program’s design after each trip” (TPP for China, Samoa, Philippines and Malaysia, 2016). When they were not privy to these types of evaluation outcomes such as student feedback, the TPP felt that it was difficult for them to integrate effective changes in time for the next study tour.

#### *Preparing students*

Another key finding was that the majority of the TPP respondents stated that the University study tour staff needed to “prepare the students prior to departure, encourage them to research and explore about their destination, and make use of the online portals provided by [our company] should they have any concerns or questions” (TPP for China and TPP for Malaysia, 2016). Another TPP participant expressed it by saying, “greater planning and preparation is needed. So everyone is aware of dates and strategies for promotion so we attract the right students in the best possible timeframe” (TPP for Samoa, 2016).

Overall, the online survey responses allowed us to group the participants’ main key suggestions. This in turn, aided in providing eleven key recommendations for possible *best practice* solutions when providing avenues for inclusive program development across expertise (see Table 3).

### **Recorded focus group discussion: Students**

Students who participated in the six recorded focus group discussions (n=94) came from disciplines that were evenly distributed across the following majors: Business, STEM, Social Sciences, Creative Industries, and Health. The majority of the cohort came from Social Sciences.

#### *What is important to students?*

One of the main findings from the discussions was that most students expressed how important it was for them that the TPP and University study tour staff possessed effective communication skills, understood management development, and the importance of incorporating meaningful industry connections when students complete their international learning experiences. Another key finding was that TPP and University study tour staff needed to be able to readily accept criticism and feedback from students by actively listening to their concerns. As one student pointed out, “without being able to sit down and talk, I didn’t quite understand clearly what we were supposed to be doing” (a student undertaking the China study tour, 2016).

#### *Learning alongside TPP*

Students also stated in their interviews that they wanted to travel and learn alongside TPP, but only when they were open to their personal stories. One student stated it this way, “I want to be able to share future career narratives with them and to receive actual insight on how other cultures live and work” (a student undertaking the Samoa study tour, 2016).

Table 3: Key recommendations to improve the Industry Study Tours' program when working across expertise

No.	Recommendations	When
1	Develop and deliver robust curricular, and make learning outcomes clear for students.	Pre-, during and post-international experience
2	Provide TPP, university staff and students with first aid and mental health training.	Pre-international experience
3	Provide a systematic and an inclusive avenue for student selection processes. For example, applicants' academic and emotional readiness for an international experience.	Pre-international experience
4	Provide students with a thorough pre-departure workshop that includes cultural briefings that are linked to the research, the importance of respect, power/distance relationships, fluidity of time, cultural sensitivities (do's and don'ts) and dress code.	Pre-international experience
5	Provide students with clear ground rules, expectations and what constitutes effective leadership qualities with a clear understanding around expected behaviours and consequences; that as a group, students should look out for each other such as culture shock, but also understand that they need to manage their own expectations.	Pre-international experience
6	Ensure students get a chance to socialise and get to know each other – use icebreakers or social events.	Pre-international experience
7	Provide clear role clarity and expectations for both students and the university study tour staff and TPP.	Pre-international experience
8	Provide students with an online area (such as <i>WhatsApp</i> ) to support students' communications styles pre-, during and post- international experience.	Pre-, during- and post-international experience
9	Provide students with online resources and as part of the assessment learning process for the benefits of being flexible and adaptable in times of complexity.	Pre- and during-international experience
10	Provide students with the opportunity to assist them to learn about resilience, patience and the importance of not judging others so quickly.	Pre-international experience
11	Provide students with the opportunity to share real world experiences to make learning deeper and richer.	Post-international experience

Additionally, another student felt that when a TPP was not culturally from the country of destination or had never travelled to that country of destination that they should still acquire a good understanding of the language to help them navigate their time while in-country (a student undertaking the India study tour, 2014 and a student undertaking the Samoa study tour, 2016).

#### *Improving the program*

Many students suggested that it was imperative that clear communication occurred between the TPP and the University study tour staff. As one student stated, they felt less engaged or trusting towards their TPP, because "I remember asking "what are we doing tomorrow" and continuously asking "what time is this or what time is that?" (a student undertaking the Philippines study tour, 2016). Whereas, another student expressed it this

way, “I think things could be handled a bit smoother but I understand it’s difficult to try and organise it and change it based on the needs of everyone in the group” (a student undertaking the Samoa study tour, 2016).

Students could pin-point when the collaborative relationship between the TPP and the University study tour staff did not operate well and why. For instance, a student said, “I also thought there was a lot of confusion and conflict between the TPP and the University teacher. Not saying it was a bad thing because it helped us develop some skills to cope with that but it caused some stress (a student undertaking the Samoa study tour, 2016). Whereas, another student expressed it this way:

The expectation was it would be a more organised trip. I understand now it can’t be because we’re all from different disciplines so it would have been good to have expectations managed. Like I understand things are different in different countries. On the second or third day we had to have a group discussion and the facilitator had to explain why things weren’t going to plan and it would have been good to know it beforehand (a student undertaking the Samoa study tour, 2016).

When students expressed that they felt that a TPP met their expectations it was notably around the areas of being personable, easy to talk to and regularly communicating with them when they “were full of ideas”, excited about the country of destination or future possibilities for international employment (a student undertaking the Philippines study tour, 2016 and a student undertaking the Samoa study tour, 2016). For example, a student noted that a TPP was “a great contact to move forward and I think she/he is an inspiration in lots of ways. I think she/he was a real plus, I think in every possible way, and she/he also gave us a real insight into the culture” (a student undertaking the China study tour, 2016).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Increasingly, providing students with short-term, international study tour programs that include work-integrated learning opportunities has taken centre stage for the higher education sector. To further assist with the expansion of such offerings, the integration and utilisation of third-party providers (TPP) has become common place and popular. In this study, we posed the following research question: what are the key recommendations for effective and inclusive collaboration amongst TPP, students and University study tour staff to create a high-quality, short-term study tour program for work-integrated learning? We used an auto-ethnography methodology with a mixed method approach to help answer the research question. This was achieved by collecting a range of data from critical friends’ meetings about our personal experiences as study tour practitioners (n=2), opinions and beliefs from TPP (n=5), University study tour staff (n=5) and students (n=94).

The evaluation outcome helped us to highlight key recommendations that pointed us towards the importance of an inclusive team approach when developing study tour programs. For example, the TPP and University study tour staff often commented on the importance of understanding the aims of the program and its employability focus, but also

acquiring professional development. TPP also made key recommendations on the importance of a shared approach for preparing students for short-term study tours that included industry-linked projects and/or internships. Whereas, students' opinion focused on the need to receive clearer guidelines and information around expectations and itinerary changes from TPP. Students commented on the value of working and learning alongside TPP and University study tour staff, but only when they were friendly, knowledgeable and took an interest in their personal career aspirations. Students also noted that TPP would do well to improve their communication skills and learn the language of the destination country if they were not from that country.

There were, however, limitations to a study such as this. The study had a modest participation rate and did not concentrate on the evaluation of the student learning experience nor the specific work-integrated learning benefits or outcomes. Rather, the research project focused on the opinions and experiences of TPP, university study tour staff and students when working and learning together. The study is therefore limited in its scope. Therefore, further research which builds upon this study would be advantageous.

What we ascertained from this study was the importance of continually finding new ways to create avenues for effective co-development opportunities with key study tour stakeholders. For instance, incorporating the key recommendations presented in this study, offering professional development sessions to TPP, inviting students to take part in curriculum design discussions with the relevant feedback being shared with TPP. This is especially important, given the many challenges, and more specifically, the increasing popularity of utilising third-party providers within the study tour landscape for the higher education sector.

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