

One Size Doesn't Fit All: Interdisciplinary Study Abroad Design

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Tags

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Setting

The Study Abroad Program (SAP) of a private university in South Asia is a short-term (approximately five-week) initiative designed to foster global exposure, cross-cultural learning, and engagement with international pedagogy. Program staff designed the curriculum for broad interdisciplinary appeal, intending to serve students from diverse academic backgrounds. Incorporating management, engineering, and business modules, university students go to destinations such as Singapore, Dubai, Australia, France, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Case

During the scheduled post-program review, the international education team read student feedback surveys from the Study Abroad Program (SAP). Many students were very satisfied with the program opportunities and reported that it served as a stepping stone to global learning and career readiness. Through the interdisciplinary course materials and the study abroad experience, students learned about diverse academic systems, teamwork, and foreign cultures—fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. They also learned about international business and management principles, and global engineering contexts.

Yet feedback suggested that the curriculum may not fully meet the academic and professional expectations of students from non-STEM or specialized fields. Recent feedback from a law student revealed this challenge.

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The student appreciated the academic and cultural exposure but noted limited alignment with her legal training. Although she completed a project comparing corporate law policies across Indian and international contexts, the experience only partially met her academic goals. The law student suggested adding discipline-specific components such as modules on international legal frameworks—comparative constitutional law, human rights law, or international trade law—and experiential elements including:

- Visits to law firms, international courts, or policy think tanks.
- Moot court workshops simulating cross-border dispute resolution.
- Interactions with legal scholars and practitioners through guest lectures or collaborative projects.

From the student's perspective, the general modules broadened her outlook but lacked the professional depth needed for international legal practice.

A similar concern emerged from an English student, who valued the intercultural exposure but found little connection between management-focused content and her literary studies.

The international educators considered whether these accounts highlighted a need to embed discipline-relevant experiences within SAP to ensure equitable learning outcomes. At the same time, they noted practical complexities. Introducing specialized tracks could compromise financial sustainability, limit cohort diversity, or conflict with equity and accreditation goals. Additional challenges included restricted access to subject-specific faculty at partner universities, insufficient industry linkages in certain fields, and higher costs for smaller cohorts. Marketing discipline-focused tracks could further complicate recruitment and institutional policy alignment.

Another consideration is whether increased specialization might inadvertently dilute SAP's intercultural purpose. Overly narrow tracks risk recreating disciplinary silos that restrict peer learning and dialogue—the very foundations of the program. On the other hand, a balanced model could embed limited discipline-linked exposure within a shared intercultural framework, blending academic relevance with global empathy and collaboration.

The international educators also raised broader concerns—would emphasizing management and law risk privileging resource-rich disciplines over the humanities and social sciences? Addressing such imbalances is essential so that curricular refinement promotes fair recognition and access across academic fields. Also, can a five-week interdisciplinary program realistically provide deep professional alignment?

Rather than striving for full specialization, programs could define clearer learning outcomes that emphasize global exposure while offering selective discipline-linked insights to maintain academic coherence. Integrating limited field-specific components can strengthen professional readiness and deepen intercultural learning.

These debates also prompted reflection on power dynamics in curriculum design, who defines what counts as valuable learning abroad: students, faculty, or institutions? Such dynamics often shape which disciplines receive visibility and resources, particularly in partnerships between Global North and South institutions. Tailoring curricula must therefore involve inclusive consultation to avoid reinforcing systemic hierarchies and ensure all perspectives are represented.

With all of this in mind, the international educators considered whether or not to change the structure of the Study Abroad Program.

Discussion Questions

As you discuss this case, consider:

- How can study abroad programs balance breadth of exposure with discipline-specific depth without compromising inclusivity or manageability?
- What innovative practices could partner universities adopt to diversify curricula and make interdisciplinary programs more relevant for non-STEM disciplines such as law, psychology, and social sciences?
- Does increased specialization risk fragmenting peer learning or weakening the intercultural mission of short-term programs?
- Who determines what constitutes valuable learning abroad—students, faculty, or institutions—and how do these power dynamics influence curriculum priorities?
- How might global North–South disparities affect which disciplines receive emphasis in study abroad design?
- What institutional or funding partnerships could promote equitable, sustainable, discipline-focused models?
- How can student expectations be managed in regard to a multidisciplinary program? How can marketing contribute to these efforts?
- After considering all of these questions, would you make any changes to the structure of the Study Abroad Program? If so, what changes would you make and why?