



UTS
e P R E S S

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 20, No. 1/2
December 2024



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Citation: Groeneveld, S. 2024. What Former ICS Students Say About Their UTS Study Abroad Experience. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 20:1/2, 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9425>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAYS

What Former ICS Students Say About Their UTS Study Abroad Experience

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9425>

Article History: Received 20/08/2024; Accepted 20/08/2024; Published 26/12/2024

Abstract

Since 1994 more than 3500 students have completed the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) and its successor, the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) at the University of Technology (UTS), which allows them to spend two semesters at one global partner university. This contribution focuses on specific situations students have experienced as transformative in light of facilitating the development of soft skills such as Intercultural Engagement, Communication skills, Intercultural Refection, Independence, Resilience, Self-Management/Project-Management, Teamwork, Creative Inquiry, Research-led Analytical Skills, and Ethics.

Keywords

BAIS; BIS; UTS; Study Abroad; Employability; Soft Skills Development

Since its introduction in 1994, more than 3,500 students have completed the Bachelor of International Studies (BAIS) and its successor, the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) at the University of Technology (UTS) as a combined degree. This degree allows students to spend two In-Country-Study (ICS) semesters at one of UTS's global partner universities. During the two years prior studying abroad, students are prepared by completing four language and culture units next to subjects addressing research methods, intercultural communication and the contemporary society of their future host country. During their time overseas, students continue with language and culture subjects at their host university. In addition, they also conduct a series of assignments leading up to an individual research project

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

addressing a specific aspect of their host culture. These assignments are supervised and marked by an UTS academic.¹

The wide-ranging set of benefits from studying abroad for both professional and personal development have been highlighted by a large body of scholarship (Roy et al. 2019). While these benefits are associated with any length of studying abroad, the full-year experience allows students to gain more in-depth and enduring linguistic, academic and personal gains (Dwyer 2004). This has a direct impact on their employability, since especially ‘soft skills,’ also known as employability skills, which students acquire and strengthen while studying overseas, are highly sought-out by employers in an ever-changing work environment (Succi & Canovi 2019). It is therefore crucial to not only increase students’ awareness and understanding of the significance of soft skills but also to assist them in taking personal responsibility in communicating what they have learned to potential future employers. To do so, ICS Coordinators have developed an ‘Employability Tool Kit’² to encourage students to actively reflect on their ICS experience by creating a personal narrative around their learning process. The following discussion will focus on the situations students have experienced as transformative in light of facilitating the development of soft skills. To gather insights for this question, former ICS-Students were asked to comment on the following ten employability skills in connection with their overseas study: Intercultural Engagement, Communication skills, Intercultural Reflection, Independence, Resilience, Self-Management/Project-Management, Teamwork, Creative Inquiry, Research-led Analytical Skills, and Ethics.³

While on ICS, students experience multitude opportunities for Intercultural Engagement with people from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. Living in student accommodation alongside other international students from different parts of the world or alternatively, in shared accommodations with locals enabled them ‘to learn something new about the world every day that I would never have considered in Australia’ (William Du, ICS China). Students noticed a broader understanding of ‘values and worldviews—for example, their attitudes towards growing up, their education system, gender roles, household values, cultural identity and much more’ (Evans Li, ICS Japan). These regular intercultural engagement opportunities are closely linked with the building of Intercultural Communication skills and as they felt ‘more confident’ in their ‘abilities to connect with and find common ground with different people’ (William Du, ICS China) and ‘getting familiar with opening up to meet people from all walks of life’ (Evans Li, ICS Japan). After the completion of ICS, some students decide to remain in their host community for an additional semester or an internship. This allows them to deepen Intercultural Engagement skills and networks even further by learning ‘about their host countries diverse cultures and perspectives that constitute it’ (Adam Brieger, ICS Latino USA).

Exercising the skill of Intercultural Reflection was experienced by students as highly transformative especially regarding their self-perception and understanding: ‘I used to think I had it all sorted out, that I understood not only myself but other people. I had a preconceived idea of what Germany, Germans, and Berlin would be like. But after a year in Berlin, I think what I really learnt was to question myself, question my predispositions, and my assumptions. I became super aware of my Australian-ness, and I began to

1 For an analysis of this program’s scaffolded approach to preparing students undertaking study abroad see Giovanangeli and Allatson (2022).

2 The ‘Employability Tool Kit’ was developed in 2019 by Angela Giovanangeli (ICS Coordinator France major), Marivic Wyndham (ICS Coordinator Chile and Argentina majors), Ilaria Vanni (ICS Coordinator Italy major) and Sabina Groeneveld (ICS Coordinator Germany major). ICS students are encouraged to complete the Employability Tool Kit exercise once during their time overseas and again shortly after the completion of their ICS year.

3 All student testimonies included here were collected at least one year after ICS completion and can be found here: <https://www.uts.edu.au/about/faculty-arts-and-social-sciences/international-studies-education/undergraduate/courses/bachelor-arts-international-studies/employability-and-skills>

question how I behaved in public, how I felt about the world, and ask why I felt those things, or why I behaved that way. I think that observing people in a different cultural setting brought about a self-awareness that I didn't have before' (Dexter Cave, ICS Germany; see also Steph Newman, ICS Japan). Many students experience themselves for the first time as an outsider or cultural minority within a host community. And while this can be a challenging experience for some, it encourages critical reflection on their own cultural identity: 'For me, growing up white in Australia afforded me privilege and anonymity: nobody ever looked at this face in a crowd. It was only when I moved to rural Japan as part of In-Country Study that I learned what it was like to be identified instantly as a foreigner. I also learned how strange so many things about my own culture seem to other cultures' (Steph Newman, ICS Japan). Furthermore, students realise 'the importance of actively listening and finding reason and having empathy for other people's personal experiences and worldviews across the political spectrum, even when they directly oppose my own' (Sally Hunt, ICS Chile).

Independence is another crucial soft skill students noticed to have developed during their year abroad. A former ICS student now working as a journalist highlights that he was prior to his ICS in Argentina 'very anxious and shy,' which was changed by the year in Argentina, where he immersed himself in a 'culture where English isn't spoken [and] requires one to come to terms with their social anxieties and to push past them. This reckoning compelled me to develop my own self-confidence in the face of adversity and I haven't looked back' (Jack Berkefeld, ICS Argentina).

The ICS-year is for most students the first time to move away from their home and from parental support. This requires them to be more organised and understanding of their actions. Former ICS student Evans Li (ICS Japan) points out that he became 'more self-sufficient and conscious' of his 'own decisions in life in setting up things like insurance, ensuring deadlines were met on top of balancing other daily tasks.' He became 'more organised and understanding' of his actions and 'rather than being told how to do something and who to compare against' developed the 'confidence in knowing' what he needed to do to achieve a positive outcome, a skill he sees as 'invaluable in adapting to a constantly changing work environment.'

Strengthening personal Resilience is closely connected to a growing sense of independence. Students must manage situations that do not go as planned on an ongoing basis and learn 'the skill of thinking on your feet' to find practical solutions and 'overcoming' problematic situations (Evans Li, ICS Japan). Resilience also can be tested by confronting cultural environments. Ninah Kobel (ICS Argentina) points out how difficult it was for her to accept that a professor at her host university in Buenos Aires asked only for 'female' students to assist him with tasks like distributing reading materials. She explains: 'the feminist in me was horrified, but I didn't know what to do. I realised I was a foreigner in a different culture and wanted to be respectful of that. But after weeks watching his assistant do his menial chores, I felt I had to say something. I decided to write him an email.' She learnt from this experience 'that resilience isn't about accepting things the way they are. It's about approaching them discerningly; thinking critically and creatively to find constructive ways of managing difficult situations. [...] I feel more positive about my exchange experience knowing I held true to my values, even while immersing myself in a new cultural environment.'

Students' resilience is further tested by the completion of their ICS research project, which requires close engagement with the host society by conducting interviews, surveys or focus groups next to other research methods to gather data. As Ankita Saha (ICS France) points out: 'My area of interest was activism and how it can be motivated by race, a contentious topic in France. I found numerous organisations in Marseille that were at the forefront of anti-racism movements and became eager to gather primary data such as interviews and observations. However, while I had an ideal plan in my head this was not as easily achieved when put into motion. I faced a plethora of challenges from non-responsive organisations to cancelled rallies and protests. Despite all of this, I remained resilient and my commitment to my research topic was kept on

track by monitoring the news and my surroundings for examples of activism commenting on or against racism. This allowed me to change my approach and reach out to individuals on a more personal level and gather interviews both in person and online, which reflected the views and opinions of a diverse make up of France's society. With every challenge I overcome, I was able to redirect the path of my project and learn the value of preserving to reach a goal.'

The above quote demonstrates that the completion of ICS assignments not only requires independence and resilience but also Self-Management/Project-Management skills. India Bennet (ICS France) highlights the high level of 'planning, initiative and engagement with local community,' which also required considerable Team- and Networking skills, to ensure a successful application of surveys and interviews for her research project:

Coordinating the interviews [...] was challenging as it required me to make, sustain and utilise connections with Caennais people. I was able to meet interviewees through the university's host family scheme and my relationship with professors. Similarly, I was able to conduct surveys of my local classmates with the help of professors who were interested in my topic. Undertaking the research required planning of how long data collection (interviewing, transcribing, distributing and collecting surveys), synthesis and analysis would take—as well as accounting for a wide margin of potential non-responses for the surveys [...]. Keeping to a strict timeline and setting and achieving goals allowed me to stay on task and ensured that I completed the project to a high standard.

At the same time, the ICS research project provides students with opportunities to exercise Creative Inquiry to gather data and to identify creative ways to analyse and present these:

My ICS project about Tempelhofer Feld used a virtual landscape tour (VLT)⁴ as a vessel to communicate an ethnographic, as well as historical understanding of the space. The idea came about from all the time I spent personally exploring the space over the year. I rode my bike around the giant park at least four times a week. And through doing this repetitive action and seeing how the park changed on a micro-scale, as well as progressively learning more about the park's history through my own research, I developed the idea for my VLT. I wanted to take my viewer on an average late-autumn bike ride but also point out the nuance, complexity, and depth of meaning present in this space. To reveal things that are not necessarily obvious, things hidden on purpose, and understand how communities continue to occupy and structure space. (Dexter Cave, ICS Germany).

Closely related to the capability of Creative Inquiry are Research-led analytical skills as Matthew Young (ICS Germany) explains:

As an aspiring filmmaker studying media and communications, I utilised my ICS research projects to more extensively practice and deepen my media analysis skills whilst specialising in the context of Germany and the German screen industry. [...] I looked at how commercial drama content producers in Germany today are treating certain German cultural identities (Eastern Germans vs West Germans) and how that representation reflects imbalanced power relations. This led me to look into on-going debates and tensions popularly featured in the local print and online media in my ICS city (Potsdam), which made what I had encountered in my analysis not just something I had studied, but something very real and present in the former Eastern German community I was now immersed in!

4 The Virtual Landscape Tour allows students to present and discuss their findings in form of a Video combined with a written component. See Dexter Cave's video here: <https://youtu.be/shnvuTe-Bds>.

Ethics is yet another crucial soft skill students acquire while on ICS. Sally Hunt (ICS Chile) points out that she was challenged by situations in which her ‘personal ethics were confronted in the face of new social, legal, environmental and cultural contexts.’ Through the negotiation of everyday ethical challenges, she developed complex ‘diplomacy skills,’ which opened her ‘mind to new perspectives’ and taught her ‘to stand up’ for herself and others when she ‘felt it was required, to lead by example, and to communicate effectively, despite a strong difference of opinion.’ The ‘depth and complexity of ethics’ she encountered throughout her ICS year are further examined by Wendy Min (ICS France): ‘I was faced with ethical questions during my year abroad through something as small as tasting foie gras to larger issues through a teaching opportunity I had in a French school where we debated concepts such as secularism, the freedom to wear a hijab versus French Republican values as well as discussions on the reintroduction in French schools of courses civics and morality.’ She elaborates further:

Since the ICS year, the skills gained in [...] ethics have surfaced countless times in my various roles whether at the frontline reporting for a major Western media in Beijing or dealing with Apple and Microsoft supply chains in Greater China Region or encountering contemporary debates during my own travels in various destinations, predominantly sanctioned and controversial countries [...]. The ICS experience continues. The difference [now] is that my ethical considerations are not limited to just France or Francophone countries but the whole world.

It becomes clear that former ICS students quite effortlessly connect the soft skills they have acquired during ICS with their employability and career pathway. Maria Gaudioso (ICS Italy), who examined pedagogy practises in Italian schools for her research project, highlights the benefits of this experience towards her networking skills and general professional development: ‘This project has demonstrated to me the importance of creating contacts with teachers in other countries and working in different intellectual traditions to learn and develop teaching methodologies.’ And Sally Hunt (ICS Chile) explains that the acquired soft skills have been ‘an important asset’ in her professional behaviours.’ Wendy Min (ICS France) emphasised that the ‘ICS mindset and skills learnt from ICS’ are ‘applicable’ regardless ‘of which industry, which country/destination.’

Beyond ICS, students continue to show a high level of confidence in language abilities and independence combined with a strong interest to engage in international work or volunteer activities. In consequence, they regularly speak a language other than English in the workplace. The acquisition of the soft skills discussed here has a direct impact on their career paths including working for a multi-national organisation and securing job opportunities overseas (Succi & Canovi 2019). William Du (ICS China) explains that the ICS year has improved his employability by enabling him ‘to bring an expansive international network and bilingualism to the job’ which is supported by his ‘cultural expertise from international connections and empirical research project.’ The wide scope of the ICS experience is further highlighted by Steph Newman (ICS Japan) who argued that returned ICS students ‘will find themselves enriched by the ability to understand what it’s like to be culturally different, a highly valuable skill for moving into multicultural workplaces.’ As we can see, the ICS experience does indeed continue in manifold ways.

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