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ESSAYS

The Global Classroom: 'We are the Dreamers of Dreams'

David S. G. Goodman

University of Sydney

Corresponding author: Professor David S. G. Goodman, International Studies Program, UTS, 1994–2008; Director, China Studies Centre, University of Sydney Australia, David.goodman@sydney.edu.au

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Abstract

This reflection explores my experiences with the University of Technology Sydney's (UTS) International Studies program, emphasising the transformative power of The Global Classroom initiative. By integrating language learning, cultural immersion, and overseas study, the program provided students with life-changing opportunities that fostered adaptability, cultural understanding, and global citizenship. My own journey—from shaping the program's early years to working abroad—reinforced the importance of international education, both for students and educators.

Keywords

International Studies; UTS; The Global Classroom; Study Abroad; Global Citizenship

It is a brisk Spring morning in early March 2024. I am sitting by the side of the road in a country town in East China. The steam is rising from the street vendor's cooking pot as I eat a breakfast of millet porridge with a deep-fried dough stick. This is and always was one of the joys of The Global Classroom: experiencing how other people live their daily lives, appreciating the difference. Perhaps that learning experience was not as great as thirty years earlier when attempting to catch a train in an Eastern European country where communication was restricted and where the ticket seller was unwilling to issue a ticket on the grounds that she did not know which platform the train might depart from or even whether it would go from this station, but nonetheless it all contributes. There really never has been any substitute for getting out and doing things that are different.

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I recently returned to Sydney after a decade of being in China. The Australia I returned to was not the one I had been working in immediately before departure and was certainly very different to the spirit in which the International Studies Program had been established. This was not just because of poor Australia-China relations but the result of a wider malaise. In many countries of the world narrow nationalism has taken the place of the wider internationalism that the University of Technology (UTS) embraced in 1994 with the development of The Global Classroom.

The essence of the International Studies program—the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies in university parlance—was that studying the languages and cultures of other countries and learning respect for different ways of life would not only benefit the individual student but would fulfill societal needs. Australia is an immigrant country where peoples from different, sometimes mutually antagonistic, cultures come together. Australia was then (and possibly remarkably still is, despite the knee-jerk nationalism of some politicians) also one of the most open economies in the world. Our graduates, we thought, would gain from the exposure and interpersonal skills they developed to the benefit of their careers, and society would have ambassadors for greater harmony as well as intellectual bridge-builders around the world.

The aim of the International Studies Program was not to emulate the language and culture programs at the more established universities. The International Studies Program was not designed to produce French literature or Japanese theatre specialists (though in that we failed at the individual level). Instead, The Global Classroom was designed in a combined degree model to add language, culture and understanding of another society to other undergraduate specialisations. With one exception (Nursing at that time, but no longer, due to registration requirements), students would combine a year of undergraduate study in their chosen language and culture with another UTS degree, spending their penultimate year at an overseas university.

For those of us on the staff in the early days the main challenges were doing something different, and all that entailed even in a very supportive university environment; and then finding universities around the world where the students might follow The Global Classroom. At the time in the mid-1990s I estimated to have visited 33 universities in 17 different countries or territories in an 18-month period. And as hinted earlier, those visits were far from uneventful and often became valuable learning experiences for me as well.

In one university town I was temporarily detained by armed guards for taking a photograph of a war memorial that just happened to be in front of military intelligence headquarters. I managed to resolve the little local difficulty when my interrogators thought I was a Manchester United fan. Actually, I have followed Manchester City since being an undergraduate there but in the telling only got as far as ‘Manchester ...’ before the guards were all over me like I was their long-lost buddy, with fraternal comments about ‘Eric Cantona.’ On another occasion at a university in Latin America the local TV station took an interest in the possibility of a sudden influx of Australians from Sydney and decided to interview me. At the end the interviewer asked on air, to reassure his audience apparently: ‘You will though make sure you only send us rugby players, won’t you.’

As the era of globalisation began to emerge, we prepared the first cohort of students for their year away in 1998. Of course they were not that many (or as many as in later years) as they had not come through direct application but had switched to the second year of the program once it had started. It was not just the students who were excited, the staff were too, as we organized a departure party. Indonesia, France, Germany, Japan, China, and Thailand were the main destinations for that first cohort.

The staff had adopted part of a late 19th century poem that one of our number had remembered from school (though not that long ago) by O’Shaughnessy (*Ode: ‘We are the Music Makers’*) as an anthem:

We are the music makers,
We are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams; -

World-losers and world-forsakers,
 On whom the pale moon gleams:
 We are the movers and shakers
 Of the world for ever, it seems.

It was duly recited as we wished the first cohort bon voyage.

The excitement of that first cohort to spend a year studying overseas was more than matched by their reflections when they returned. One of those students who had been to Thailand reported not simply how much she had enjoyed herself, but also how much she had learned from the experience. 'It was,' she said, 'like hearing a piece of music played for the first time by an orchestra and choir, when previously it had only been sung by a lone voice. The richness and complexity was profound.'

For the staff we certainly were excited by what we were doing. There was considerable enjoyment in dealing with the different parts of the world in all their complexity. And of course as almost all of the specialist staff were not native Australians our *esprit de corps* was based on accepting our own inherent differences in cultures and values. In 1997 I was scheduled to visit Manado in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, to see about sending students there. Consulting a travel guide I read that it had a special cuisine: 'Manado is famous for spicy dog meat. Some other traditional delights include fried forest rat. Top it off with stewed bat and wash it down with vegetable porridge.' I showed this report to a Chinese colleague whose comment was 'Yugh ! vegetable porridge.' That was not the reason we did not send students there in the end though. Manado at that time was not sufficiently socially stable. Catching a taxi from the airport to the university I was accompanied not just by my host but also by his armed guard. When in all naivety I asked why the armed guard was necessary he explained: 'So we don't get kidnapped and held to ransom.'

The International Studies Program inevitably remains a great experiment for both students and staff. Its graduates have gone on to employment in industry, trade, government and community service, and even despite the original intent in universities across the world. Many have become leaders and managers. Some of its longer-term graduates continue to embarrass me when we meet by emphasising the extent of the life-changing experience. And even though it is some time since I left UTS (the end of 2008) I still enjoy reading about the later exploits of more recent graduates from The Global Classroom, even if they are applying for academic positions. As for the staff, some stayed through to promotion or retirement, and oftentimes both, and some have moved on to other universities both in Australia and other countries. Some even made it across the road to the more establishment universities on Broadway.

When our politicians turn their backs on the rest of the world they turn their backs on not just the rest of us and our new emergent society, but also themselves. One lesson of The Global Classroom is that change is the only constant. This has applied to the International Studies Program itself too in the past and presumably will in the future. As I sit by the side of the road in China I wish it well.