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ESSAY

A Lecturer's Perspective on Teaching in the Bachelor of International Studies

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), with particular attention to the subject *Contemporary Spain* and the capstone *In-country Study and Fieldwork Project (ICS)* in the Spanish Major. Framed by the understanding that study abroad is shaped by both program design and student participation, the paper examines how these subjects foster intercultural competencies, research skills, and global perspectives. Drawing on student testimonies and academic reflections, it explores the intellectual, personal, and professional growth experienced by learners, as well as the challenges and opportunities of living and studying abroad. The discussion highlights the BIS as a transformative program that prepares students to become engaged global citizens, capable of contributing to a more equitable, sustainable, and interconnected world.

Keywords

International Studies; Spanish Studies; European Studies; Global Citizenship; Cultural Studies; Intercultural Studies

Since 2012, I have been teaching in the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) program at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), where I began as a lecturer in Spanish Language and Culture. In 2022, I took on the coordination of the Contemporary Spain subject, and one year later, the academic supervision of students undertaking their capstone study abroad subject, the In-country Study and Fieldwork Project in the Spanish Major. In 2023, I also commenced coordination of the International Intensive Electives—two- to six-week overseas

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study courses open to students from different degrees across the university. I have therefore taught a wide variety of undergraduate students, including those in international outbound mobility programs (or preparing to participate in them) for many years. As an academic of Spanish heritage, I am proud to be part of the team supporting students to become competitive, active, and responsible global citizens. This reflection highlights the ways in which the Contemporary Spain and In-country Study and Fieldwork Project subjects shape students into global citizens.

UTS is a large public tertiary institution in the centre of Sydney. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities in the world ([QS World University Rankings, 2024](#)). The BIS is an undergraduate program delivered in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). Initially named the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) in 1994, the degree was renamed the Bachelor of International Studies in 2022 following a program redesign. Since its inception, the International Studies program has aimed to provide place-based intercultural and multilingual education, as well as inquiry-based study abroad experiences, to UTS students. In 2024, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the program.

Over the years, the BIS has evolved in terms of its language and country specialisation offerings. However, the program's distinctive design has endured for more than three decades. The BIS is an undergraduate combined degree that partners with more than thirty programs across UTS faculties. Its integrated structure enables students to complete two degrees concurrently and graduate with double qualifications. Learners undertake preparatory subjects such as Intercultural Communication; they then select a specialisation through one of the language and culture programs offered (currently Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish). They also complete the relevant Contemporary Society country specialisation subject and further core subjects in intercultural communication. These courses prepare students for study abroad and encourage them to engage with international studies as more than language learning alone ([Vande Berg, 2007](#); [Hadis, 2005](#); [Merva, 2003](#)).

Additionally, the BIS offers flexible study options that include embedded overseas study experiences and/or internships with international organisations, culminating in an organisational ethnography. UTS maintains extensive worldwide connections with more than 240 universities in over 40 countries, and internationalisation remains a key strategic priority.

- International Honours, which includes a full year of In-country Study (ICS) for their Major in one of the countries of specialisation at a UTS partner university, where they complete an honours level research project;
- Language, Culture and Global Exchange, which consists of a six-month global exchange at any partner university; and
- Language, Culture and the Professional World, which consists of two to six weeks of overseas studies.

In all pathways, students gain global perspectives and intercultural communication skills. Learners further develop graduate attributes through critical thinking, research project management, and the acquisition of soft skills fostered by study abroad, such as independence, resilience, and adaptability. These skills and attributes distinguish graduates in the job market, as they are both highly valued by employers and essential for effective intercultural communication in professional settings. Furthermore, the BIS integrates foreign language proficiency, the study of cultures and global society, and the development of intercultural competencies to prepare students to become global citizens and future leaders at both national and international levels.

The following sections reflect in more detail some of the ways I have observed students developing global citizenship skills through two specific subjects I teach in the BIS: Contemporary Spain and In-Country Studies and Fieldwork Project Spain.

Contemporary Spain: The Beginning of the Journey

As part of the Bachelor of International Studies, students engage with the Contemporary Society subject aligned to their chosen country specialisation. In my case, this is Contemporary Spain. The subject is taught in English and is undertaken in the second year of students' combined undergraduate degrees. It is a key component of the program because it is anchored in the field of cultural studies and draws on critical theory related to transculturation.

Contemporary Spain introduces students to the historical, political, cultural, social, and economic dimensions of Spain from local, national, European, and global perspectives. Through collaborative, interactive, and reflective learning approaches, students explore the diversity of national and cultural identities, plurilingualism, gender, film, music, art, migration, economics, politics, and the evolving sociocultural landscape of modern Spain. The learning environment promotes collaboration with peers from across UTS programs, fostering dynamic and enriching intellectual exchange while developing teamwork and leadership skills.

Furthermore, the subject equips students with critical skills to identify, reflect on, analyse, and understand the major sociocultural challenges shaping Spain's diverse and dynamic cultures. It also introduces students to international perspectives through theoretical and methodological approaches to inquiry-based learning and intercultural research. Evidence of engagement is reflected in consistently strong Student Feedback Survey (SFS) results. Students have described Contemporary Spain as 'one of the best subjects taken at UTS,' with another remarking that it was 'so interesting,' and that they had 'learned more in this subject than in probably any other subject at university.'

The beginning of the journey of Contemporary Spain challenges the preconceptions that students may have about Spain and provides them with a deeper understanding of its cultural diversity. From the first week of class, learners confront stereotypes about Spain and develop skills over the session to debate how they will be able to contribute to researching sociocultural aspects of modern-day Spain, particularly during their future study abroad period. Learners are therefore rewarded not only with intellectual growth but also with critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, empathy, respect, values, and cultural and intercultural awareness as they reflect on their work. One student said: 'The subject clearly opened my eyes to the reality of the socio-political situation in Spain [...] and helped me be sensitive to the community of each region and learn about their specific perspectives in a respectful manner.' Another student commented: 'The political background and history of Spain were fundamental to my cultural literacy once I was in Spain, as well as contributing to my Research Project [conducted in the study abroad phase of the program]. It sparked an interest in me that prompted me to investigate such politics in my own time and to question why I had never before heard about it.'

In my role as a coordinator who takes students on the journey of Contemporary Spain, I enjoy seeing their progression as they advance in their learning experiences and develop linguistic, communicative, cultural, and intercultural competencies. As a teacher, I feel responsible for contributing to the development of students' skills as global citizens and leaders, equipping them with the knowledge to navigate the world, recognise their responsibilities, and make a positive difference. Additionally, as a Spaniard, seeing my students' progression and passion for learning about my home country makes me feel very proud.

In-country Study and Field Project in Spain: Into the Journey

The experience of living and learning abroad has taken on a significant role for universities as a way of developing intercultural competencies in the twenty-first century. The BIS offers different pathways for overseas studies; however, for this reflection, I focus on the In-country Study and Fieldwork Project (ICS), a unique capstone subject where students spend a year abroad enrolled in a Spanish partner university

and take humanities-related subjects relevant to the host country. At the same time, they are mentored academically by a UTS supervisor to complete a research project on the host country, which is graded by UTS. Learners have the opportunity to develop greater proficiency in Spanish and immerse themselves in a new environment with different cultures through the host university experience, while also developing research competencies and broadening global perspectives through the home university assessment schedule, engaging with the design and execution of a research project about the host country ([Sánchez & Santos, 2016](#); [Høj, 2009](#); [Tomalin, 2008](#); [Risager, 2007](#); [Andersen et al., 2006](#); [Alptekin, 2002](#)). This one-year journey provides valuable personal, academic, and professional experiences.

Through the research project component of this subject, students, under the guidance of their UTS supervisor, select a topic that aligns with their interests. They are exposed to a variety of research methodologies that enable them to develop their project during the year of exchange. Through this inquiry-based component, they gain valuable research skills, learning to collect, analyse, and synthesise information from diverse sources to address the topic by applying critical thinking and formulating arguments into effective academic writing. These analytical, critical thinking, and communication skills are also part of broader problem-solving abilities. Additionally, the construction of the project and engagement with methodologies (e.g., interviews, surveys, focus groups, observation) require oral and written communication in Spanish, as well as collaboration with the host society.

The research project not only showcases students' research skills but also contributes to the field of international and cultural studies. The students' field projects address sociocultural aspects in their host society and focus on the current challenges in contemporary Spain, enhancing their knowledge of the host country ([Cushner & Karim, 2004](#); [Carlson & Widaman, 1988](#); [Nash, 1976](#); [Bicknese, 1974](#)). Samples of topics that have emerged in this subject include: 'The depiction of Moroccan youth by the media,' 'What are the attitudes and perceptions of young people living in Madrid toward the news and how do they engage with it?,' 'The rise of the far right and Spanish perceptions of feminism,' 'The barriers facing young people to accessing quality employment in the labour market,' 'Solo sí es sí: how a law influenced image and changed conversations,' 'The perception of Islamophobia since the rise of the far-right VOX party,' and 'The attitudes and perceptions of Spaniards towards the Spanish monarchy.' These projects illustrate how students are willing to engage with and critically examine international and national issues ([Dolby, 2007](#)).

In addition to developing strong research skills, students during their study abroad period improve their proficiency in Spanish as a foreign language and gain insights into the use of body language, gestures, and cultural norms that are crucial for communication in diverse cultural contexts. The skills students develop in ICS align with studies on language learning and study abroad. According to [Fox et al. \(2019\)](#), learning a language enhances students' understanding of cultural distinctions, strengthens self-confidence and brain development, and opens new perspectives and career opportunities, among other benefits. For [Stephenson \(2002\)](#), immersion opportunities in diverse cultures enhance cross-cultural communication skills and foster the acquisition of different cultural perspectives, traditions, and values. These intercultural communication skills and the development of cultural sensitivity allow students to develop an awareness of cultural differences, which in turn fosters respectful and inclusive communication. Likewise, intercultural understandings show students how cultural differences influence global interactions and relations. Meanwhile, the student ICS journey is also shaped by challenges in navigating and adapting to the complexities of a new environment. These challenges, however, present opportunities to better understand a globalised world.

In my role as an academic supervisor of ICS students, I support their learning journey by facilitating and advising them on living, studying, and undertaking fieldwork in Spain. I have built strong academic

relationships with students who share their experiences, challenges, and rewards with me. Their firsthand encounters with local customs, traditions, studies, research, and ways of life, as well as the challenges they face, prompt me to reflect on and integrate these insights into the content of my teaching subjects and the advice I give to future students.

Testimonies from ICS students emphasise the various ways that living and studying in a host country have impacted their lives. Firstly, students refer to stepping outside of their comfort zone, a point also highlighted by Zaykovskaya and colleagues in their study on the benefits of study abroad (2017). Furthermore, students mention their personal growth (Milstein, 2005; Gmelch, 1997; Kauffmann, 1992), noting that the challenges of the ICS experience trigger self-reflection and greater self-awareness. This occurs because studying abroad often requires them to re-examine personal strengths and weaknesses (Jessup-Anger, 2008; Hoffa, 2007; Hadis, 2005; Younes & Asay, 2003; Bowman, 1987). One student reflected: 'ICS has forced me to learn things about life and develop an individual perspective on certain topics that I hadn't really thought about or delved into because of my "sheltered" environment. Examples range from the issues of finding jobs to what is happening in the Middle East.'

Another key aspect of the ICS experience relates to the value of cultural experiences, such as interaction with locals, learning social etiquette, and engaging in cultural activities. One student reflected: 'I learned to understand the people from a fundamentally different "world" to me, and I enjoyed learning to celebrate these differences. I built friendships with people from more than twenty different countries.' Students also point out that the ICS journey pushes their boundaries and challenges their ideas about identity and lifestyle (Dolby, 2004; Talburt & Stewart, 1999). These experiences are closely linked to the development of cultural awareness and sensitivity (Coleman, 2015; Clarke, 2009; Pedersen, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Anderson, 2006; Black & Duhon, 2006; Williams, 2005; Shaheen, 2004). Such skills foster empathy, curiosity, respect, and open-mindedness (Hadis, 2005; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001).

Additionally, the ICS experience improves soft skills such as independence, resilience, and adaptability to diverse environments, whereby students expand their perspectives, morals, values, and beliefs (Lindsey 2005; Jurgens & McAuliffe 2004; Ryan & Twibell 2000). With this in mind, a student commented:

Primarily, ICS has given me empathy for what it is to be an immigrant, living in a land that is not your own, in a country that isn't your own. Having an immigrant background, I learnt the challenges that my grandparents had to go through, and the beauty in diversity, and this humbled me in a way that awakened me to the fact that the world is much bigger than my environment.

As a result of the study abroad experience, students become more resourceful and confident. They also remark on their professional growth and employability. For example, one student shared: 'Without a doubt, ICS was fundamental, if not pinnacle to the catalyst, of my growth as a person and as an international designer.'

A final key factor is the improvement of foreign language skills. A student mentioned, 'I now have the confidence to speak a different language, I also have the ability to build connections with strangers from different backgrounds, and the confidence to travel by myself in unfamiliar places.' As students reflect on their ICS experiences, challenges, and outcomes always appreciate the growth they have achieved, as well as the connections and memories created.

The journey into ICS offers language immersion in diverse cultures within the host society and develops research competencies that foster global awareness and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the world. Through this knowledge and these skills, learners come to recognise their role as global citizens, encouraged to engage with both national and international challenges. Testimonies from ICS students confirm that those who participate in study abroad programs demonstrate significantly higher levels of

ethnorelativism and are 'better prepared to understand life choices and behaviours' ([Clarke, 2009](#), p. 177). One student reflected:

My ICS in Spain showed me a different way of living that is centred around togetherness and community—far from the “hustle” culture and individual lifestyle that I am accustomed to in Australia. I truly loved socialising through the week, rather than waiting for the weekend. This social and often relaxed culture showed me that there are other ways of living, whereas I had previously only known one-way of life.

Furthermore, studying abroad expands intellectual development ([McKeown 2009](#); [Zhai & Scherr 2002](#)). A student commented:

I would consider myself a global citizen in that I relate aspects of my life and profession to the world around me—understanding, acknowledging, and engaging with the different contexts of existence that, simply, are. A strong example of this would be the experience I had undergoing my research project, in which I had to take on the perspective of a designer, educator, and researcher from two diverse socio-cultural backgrounds; allowing myself to place myself in another set of shoes opens up one's mind to think in different ways.

Consequently, ICS provides learners personal and intellectual journey with a unique and valuable lifelong learning experience as a global citizen.

Additionally, the experience of living and learning abroad expands students' global perspectives, or world-mindedness ([Golay, 2006](#); [Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004](#); [Cushner & Mahon, 2002](#); [Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001](#)). One student reflected: 'I am more open-minded to diversity and am willing to go a step further to understand and embrace it.' Learners also become more ethical and globally aware ([Latz et al., 2015](#); [Clarke, 2009](#); [Jessup-Anger, 2008](#); [Dolby, 2007](#); [Fuller, 2007](#); [Dessoff, 2006](#); [Hadis, 2005](#); [Kitsantas, 2004](#); [Younes & Asay, 2003](#); [Olson & Kroeger, 2001](#)) because they develop an increased sense 'of responsibility to the global community' ([Clarke, 2009](#), p. 176). Another student remarked: 'I am much more confident in myself and more willing to speak up.'

This comprehensive understanding of global challenges and their complexities is achieved through critical thinking and an ability to evaluate global issues from multiple perspectives. A student wrote: 'I have been more engaged in other cultures, and I am currently helping out with the international student side of a university group I am in, as I know how a newfound appreciation for international students and how hard life can be for them, as I still remember those who helped me in Spain, I wish to be that person for them.' In the twenty-first century, global competence is essential ([Deardorff & Charles, 2018](#); [Fischer, 2007](#); [Friedman, 2005](#)) for navigating an interconnected world ([Knight, 2015](#); [Engle & Engle, 2002](#); [Hoffa, 2002](#); [Bolen, 2001](#)). Therefore, graduates are equipped with the skills to advocate for social justice and to contribute to building a more equitable and sustainable world.

Concluding Remarks

The BIS at the University of Technology Sydney is an undergraduate combined degree designed to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives necessary to thrive in a globalised world. The experiences, challenges, and outcomes of students demonstrate that the BIS and ICS in Spain are impactful and transformative journeys of intellectual, personal, and professional growth, underscoring their role in shaping engaged global citizens. Thanks to the program's structure—its subjects, emphasis on deep cultural understanding, intercultural communication, research methodologies, critical thinking skills, and exploration of global challenges—learners are empowered to contribute meaningfully to the wider world. Graduates of the BIS develop a strong sense of global citizenship, recognising their responsibility to contribute to a more

equitable, sustainable, and just society by understanding the interconnectedness of the world. Furthermore, they are well positioned to make a global impact through their lifelong commitment to global engagement. They graduate prepared to embrace new challenges, foster intercultural understanding, and realise their potential as leaders in a complex, interconnected world.

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