A VET Outbound Mobility program at New York Fashion week: Problems and Opportunities

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Abstract

This research explores the experience eight students from Victoria University had during a Vocational Education and Training outbound mobility project. The intent of an outbound mobility project is for students to undertake study, research and professional development to increase their skills and gain international experience while working at a high level.

The students, four hairdressers and four make-up artists, undertook advanced training in Australia and then spent nine days working with or observing experienced professionals working behind the scenes at New York Fashion Week. Opportunities to work behind the scenes at one of the world's largest fashion events are rare. Students who graduate with recognised training qualifications and experience applying their skills in an internationally-recognised fashion forum are highly sought after by employers.

The qualitative research approach sought to triangulate information sources to explore learner, teacher and industry perceptions of the experience. This paper explores two questions: What did Australian students involved in international WIL gain from their learning experience? And, how can their experiences inform future programs? The study found that the students had a marvelous experience, but this can be marred if the program is not organised and administered well.

Introduction

While many students from overseas choose to study in vocational education and training (VET) programs in Australia, few Australian VET students appear to undertake VET studies through outbound mobility programs overseas. It has been pointed out that 'Australian vocational education and training institutions have a low level of involvement in outbound student mobility programs' (Cathcart, 2008, p.4). Outbound mobility is defined as:

Any form of international mobility which takes place within a student's program of study. The length of absence can range from a short trip to the full duration of the course of study. In addition to study, mobility can include a period in a workplace or other non-education environment (Cathcart, 2008, p.6).

Its forms can include long or short-term exchange programs, study tours, volunteering, internships or work placements and a post-award scholarship or program (DETE, 2011). Benefits include personal and academic growth, intercultural development, educational and career advancement and improved language skills (Cathcart, 2008).

In 2007 expressions of interest were sought from TAFE and private VET providers to support pilot outbound mobility programs in their institutions. They also aimed to provide suggested 'good practice tools and techniques' (DETE, 2011). A small number of pilot outbound mobility programs were undertaken in 2008 and introduced nationally in 2009. The programs were funded as part of the Endeavour VET Mobility Grants and run under the auspices of the Australian Education International. The funding provided a $2,000 subsidy for each participating student, which was used to help cover the cost of airfares and living expenses. For an accompanying staff member, $1,500 was made available for organising the outbound mobility project, evaluating or monitoring the students' progress and the supervision of the assessment overseas (DEEWR, 2011, p.6).

A successful submission for funding through this scheme was made in December 2011 by the School of Service Industries in the (then) Faculty of Technical Trade and Innovation at Victoria University (VU), which provided an opportunity for eight students to extend their current skills and have the holistic experience of seeing the fashion, make-up and hairdressing industries linked together as a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience. This involved working and observing activities "behind the scenes" at New York Fashion Week in 2012. As some of the applicants were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the government subsidy was beneficial.

A condition of the funding required that participating students were enrolled in courses leading to the award of Certificate IV or above. To prepare for this program each group undertook a specific unit of competency within the relevant National Training Package. The hairdressing students undertook the unit of competency, *SIHHHTLS403A Work as a Session Stylist* in the Certificate IV in Hairdressing, while the make-up students studied the Diploma of Make-up unit *CUFMUP402A Maintain Make-up and Hair Continuity*. These units of competency provided the basis for the training that occurred prior to departure, and were also used as a basis to reflect on and assess the outcomes of the program in New York.

In order to answer the proposed questions the paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, the methodology, including how – and what – information was collected. Secondly, the selection of participants is covered. Finally, the paper uses the 'Best Practice Guide for Developing Outbound Mobility Programs' (DETE, 2011) as an organising framework to help describe the program's processes before during and after the trip to New York and evaluate their effectiveness. The six phases suggested in the best practice guide have been collapsed into three major areas of concern: that is, setting up the program; running the program in New York; and what was learnt from the experiences and how such a program might be run well in future. The paper concludes that while the project offered a valuable experience for all those involved, there were a number of problems and opportunities that future programs might wish to consider.

The Methodology

The best way to understand this outbound mobility program was to study it in its context. For this reason, the data was collected using observations, document analysis and open-ended questions. The primarily qualitative research approach sought to triangulate information sources using the students, the accompanying teacher and the industry

representative to gain differing perspectives. Qualitative data about the student experience comprises a range of components:

1. Three sets of semi-structured interviews with the range of informants before, during and after the mobility program, which were conducted by the author in order to ascertain student understanding of their experience in relation to the requirement of the unit of competence they studied in preparing for the placement and the value of the program as a WIL experience

2. Portfolio and journal evidence collected by the students of their activities during Fashion Week. This was used to help them reflect on their own personal development. In addition their individual portfolios were mapped against the unit of competency involved and thematically analysed to compose narrative accounts. The photos, postings on Facebook and informal discussions with the industry representative were used to confirm or challenge the findings of the students. The accompanying teacher also collected observational field notes.

3. Interviews with participants, which were generally short (taking no more than 30 minutes) were recorded on an i-phone after each participant had given written consent.

A number of VU's graduate capabilities provided a basis for the questions and the portfolios. The capabilities focused on: solving problems; planning and organisational skills; and working as part of a team. Interviews were conducted both in Australia and New York. The recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed to find themes to assist in answering the research question. The research focused on two following major questions: What did Australian students involved in international work integrated learning program gain from their learning experience? How can their experiences inform future programs?

This paper uses the six phases described in the 'Best Practice Guide for Developing Outbound Mobility (DETE, 2011) as a basis for describing how the outward mobility program was organised. These phases involve preparing the organization, developing an outbound mobility platform, establishing the program, and then promoting, managing and sustaining it. For our purposes we have concentrated on three of these phases:

- Setting up the program, which was principally concerned with participant selection

- Managing (and running) the program

- Sustaining the program, in particular by examining the problems and opportunities encountered.

Findings of the Research

Setting up the program and selecting participants

The students interested in undertaking this program were required to attend an information session. Eight places were available and over fifty students attended. The process of selection was extensive, but transparent.

The students had to design and present a portfolio of their work, including photos/video, a storyboard, or any other creative way they chose to present their experience. They also had to write a short piece (maximum of 150 words) detailing why they deserved this opportunity, supply personal references and give a description of what they knew about New York Fashion Week to show a demonstrated commitment to the profession. The interview panel consisted of a VU teacher, industry and retail product representative.

The successful students who made it through the first process then had to be available for up to two industry skills tests. These skills tests were where the first major problem for the project arose. The hairdressing apprentices undertaking their Certificate III in hairdressing did not demonstrate the skills or knowledge needed to work behind the scenes. The environment behind the scenes in New York is for elite hairdressers from around the world. Trying to introduce apprentices and new industry hairdressing/make-up students into this environment is challenging: the models are paid thousands of dollars a day and expect a level of maturity and experience from those working on them.

After many lengthy communications between VU staff and the industry representative it was decided to select only those hairdressing students who were enrolled in Certificate IV and had specific skills in fashion show experience. When the four students who met this criteria submitted resumes, it was discovered that these particular students had impressive experience including a place in 2011/2012 Fame Team, Hairdressing and Beauty Industry Association (HBIA), Senior of the Year, and AHFA Victorian/Tasmanian hairdresser of the Year for 2012 and received Judges Recognition for New Creative Force Hair Expo 2012, as well as being a member of the Sebastian Urban Design Team.

Managing and running the program

This small outward mobility program was undertaken at a time of immense global and local change. First the global economic crisis in late 2008 demanded budget cuts in many sectors of the workforce. As the AVETRA theme suggests the future of VET is "uncertain and edgy....with the emerging scenarios strongly influenced by...events outside our control". In addition to responding to policy changes and reduced funding, VU was also undergoing a major organisational reform program to respond to this new competitive environment.

Locally, VU began a major organisational reform program to respond to this new competitive environment. These policy and funding changes occurred during the design phase of this project. The changes, along with their cost cutting measures, put immense financial stress on the School of Service Industries which ultimately affected its resourcing.

There were constraints in terms of time release for staff to organise the program. This is confirmed in the best practice guide which reports "gaining support from senior

management to invest time and resources into outbound mobility is difficult" (DETE, 2011, p.13). For example, the teacher organised a timetable to plan the duration of each learning session and organised as many placements as possible within the dates that had been allocated. This took place in the teacher's personal time as she had to maintain her full teaching load and was very overwhelmed. Nevertheless she was able to find places on the internet and built the itinerary from there. The time and effort required to produce an international itinerary is much greater when you are starting the project from scratch, rather than joining a team or picking up a project where someone else has already made a significant contribution. Consequently, the design stage was a lot more demanding and time-consuming than it first appeared and there was no time to thoroughly check the sites in advance. Also, the detail of the student program did not receive managerial scrutiny for similar reasons. This led to an itiniery that looked good on paper but in reality the sites were not accessible.

In preparation in organising the event ...I believe that someone should have been taken out of class...to organise the itinerary etc so that obviously the process and procedures flowed a lot better than what they have. As I wasn't given any time to do anything...it was in my own time to organise an itinerary (VU teacher)

Once the students were in New York, accessing training became a bigger challenge than previously predicted. Without industry contacts in the USA, it was difficult to access New York Fashion Week shows. There was hairdressing access through our industry representative but no make-up access for our students. Gaining access to the learning sites was not something that should have been left to chance after the students had left Australia.

The best practice guide cites funding as being the "single largest barrier" and this also proved to be the case in this project. To support the students financially the School of Service Industries arranged a fundraiser dinner and some media awareness about the eight students that had been selected to represent VU during New York Fashion Week Sep 6- 14th 2012. Unfortunately, it did not make any money.

The project funding from DEEWR was not enough to support the entire project and there was no additional funding provided to subsidise the students or the teacher undertaking this project. The implementation of the funding changes at VU had started to impact on the culture of the organisation and current funding cuts made it very difficult to place one staff member - let alone allocate a team of practitioners - to deal with the challenges of establishing this pilot project.

As this was my first time dealing with student outbound mobility program ...it was a pilot for me as well as Vic Uni but I found that the preparation, someone should have been taken off line and given the time to deal with the networking and arrangements and itinerary, all the logistics behind [it] ... obviously if that was done we wouldn't have had all the problems that just [kept] roller coasting from arriving [in New York] (VU teacher)

Of high importance in gaining sufficient funding is the fact that WIL measures do not map well into the funding models behind the provision of Australian Training Packages (TPs). Programs such as the Outward Mobility program assume that part of the funding will be provided by the institution concerned. However, in times of lean budgets this

became a problem with this project. TPs do not specify how the outcomes will be achieved, but the funding model place restrictions which often limit learning experiences which are "outside the box" of classroom teaching.

So, whilst TPs allow for greater choices and opportunities for students in the VET sector, including WIL, additional costs involved have to be met by the institution thus limiting the range of experiences available to students. Competency is more than just gaining skills and knowledge under routine conditions. It includes 'task management skills, contingency management skills (dealing with irregularities and breakdowns in routine) and job/role environment skilled (e.g. working with others)'(NTB, 1992, p.29). Yet attempts to provide exciting and pertinent learning experiences for students often result in funding difficulties. Experiences such as the outward mobility program enable students to develop 'the ability to apply relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes consistently over time and in the required workplace situations and environments'(NSSC, 2012, p.4).

The Australian students must be deemed competent against each element in a unit of competency. Gaps will inevitably exist and it is the responsibility of VU to find ways to address the gaps in the learning required for the students, in order to gain credit towards their course (DETE, 2011). Mapping documents were developed well in advance of the project implementation. However, this was difficult as the context of the New York Fashion Week and its organisation was not well understood beforehand. The practical work the students undertook was either through observation or assisting others. However, as (Down, 2006) noted, the learning involved was not bounded and therefore could not be predicted in advance, nor was it even across different students.

Additionally, there were issues in relation to practical assessment as the students had to work collaboratively rather than autonomously. Also, because of the degree of unbounded learning involved in their experience, the outcome of working autonomously and the requirement of showing consistency of skills, knowledge and attitudes over time, could not be reliably or validly assessed in a one week time-frame.

The program in New York - before, during and after

Before the students undertook the outbound mobility the four hairdressers were working in the salon and the four make-up students were attending VU fulltime. The following are comments made before the students left for New York in response to the question: How would you compare WIL learning to when you are learning in a classroom?

I think a combination of learning in the workplace and classroom learning because if I hadn't of learnt in the classroom then I wouldn't be able to work in the workplace. I just think it's as simple as that.

Learning in the workplace, definitely, I find when you are out and about and actually doing it and seeing how it all comes together I find I learn better doing more practical work than theory, than reading out of a book or anything like that. I work better when I'm under pressure.

I think that when you're on the job there's definitely a professionalism that you need to take on...you're with a lot of people who have been in the industry for years...you don't know everything and I think compared to a classroom...where it's ok to speak up and say "I don't agree

with that" or "I think it looks better like this" whereas on the job it's kind of like the place where you get told what to do and you just do it.

During the outbound mobility many students said that working behind the scenes made them apprehensive about doing models hair/make-up; they did not want to work under pressure. They felt scared of letting the team and the industry representative down. For these students in this particular context, problem solving includes the ability to work under pressure applying the elements and principles of design and a broad range of technical skills to create creative, contemporary and period designs, and applying a range of classic and current hair designs on short, medium and long hair in short turnaround times.

According to (Giles, 2003) one of the key features of working under pressure is the requirement to make discretionary judgements, 'an approach that draws attention to the main features of judgements along with a growing awareness of the contributing factors of "hot action" the analysis of decision making under pressure' (p.2). However, they were happy to assist, and made the following comments:

I was out of my comfort zone so I took a step back and I was allowing people to instruct me on what to do.

I was very nervous obviously being in a different country and it's a different culture and style of makeup in America… I think is a little bit different than what we have learnt. The lady I was working for was really understanding...that I come from a different country...but I think if you've got your technique and your skill I think it's easy to manoeuvre around.

They felt that it was too intense, they were happy to be assistants but not actually work at Fashion Week. They found it too overwhelming so we're talking about experienced people. None of these girls had less than 5 years of experience [after completing their apprenticeships] … It was interesting (Industry representative)

From the above comments, it is clear that the students were exposed to many situations and were somewhat out of their 'comfort zone'. The industry representative also supports this idea. In terms of the Dreyfus (1980) model, which outlines the five stages of competency from novice to expert, this reluctance to 'jump in' but feel comfortable in assisting makes sense for an advanced beginner. A move from novice to expert comprises a change from detached observer to active performer and being able to continually transform the repertoire of skills and knowledge that make you an expert. The students had a working knowledge of key aspects of practice with an understanding of tasks to be completed to industry acceptable standards. Practical situations are more complex than they initially seemed and the students understood the complexity and had the ability to achieve some steps using their own judgement. However, supervision was required at the completion of the task.

Of course there are similarities between the classroom and the workplace. For example, the application, process, and techniques were the same. However, it was the small steps in between and problems that might arise that were different. As one student commented:

The designer Von vonny… his friend Lorenzo… came maybe an hour or two hours in… and he's

like, "Oh my God, the lashes are too big, the girls looked like transvestites." To me, I even felt a bit of panic for the girls because they had to [sit] the girls back down… and I thought they would have just ripped their lashes off and put the other ones on, but instead one of the girls went around to each model and just cut the lashes just to shorten them which was better… on time as well as effective on equipment, wasn't wasting material …so I found that was a bit of a challenge for them

The students seemed to have enough theoretical background along with contextual observations to make decisions and when they later reflected on these decisions their confidence had grown. The students' comments reflect they had learnt not to panic and to believe in themselves. The following comments were collected from the teacher, industry representatives and students after their return:

I've started a relationship there...it's great. It's only two but it's a relationship that can start, they know who we are, we don't have to introduce ourselves, etc, etc. Now that's going to be completely pulled away and lost because next year...there's been a submission for London (VU teacher).

Getting on shows was a challenge, you know, having to convince Rodney (Director) to take them on because his assistant said to me they get requests from all over the world continually and it's because of that relationship that I've built up that they took the four girls on and even then they requested that, you know... it was more convincing them that I was taking girls of really good quality there (Industry representative).

It helped me in stressful situations to think of a solution. So the next time I am on a show or I am in a situation where I need to hurry up, I think that's what I got out of it more, like how to combat a problem without stressing out to the point of not being able to do anything. But technically hair wise, no, I don't think it developed me at all to be honest (Student).

my gosh, his sectioning patterns are so intense, so it was really good, I was right there as it was happening so in hairdressing wise that was my biggest highlight. I got to meet someone that's big in the industry and that's pretty well known.

Sustaining the program: Problems and opportunities

Any project that takes individuals to another country needs to understand a range of systems such as the medical and insurance systems. For example, one of the students fell ill overseas and the cost of the medication – one thousand dollars for eye cream - was so expensive that she had to return to Australia for affordable medical care. In the future, a better understanding of these issues is needed. Although there was medical insurance provided, in this example, the cost covered was not sufficient. The need for personal insurance should be strongly encouraged. The following is in relation to the complex online medical insurance form:

It's an excel spreadsheet so it doesn't respond very easily...they took days to fill out this form. I have seen the form...it's just one document...and it takes days to fill out...these girls had a hell of time trying to do that...I've got one of my students that's on a plane today...her eyes, shingles, her left eye has got worse, she went to the doctors to get some medication, it cost her a thousand

dollars upfront and hence, let's just go back to the credit card bit, that would have helped me if there was a situation of an emergency.

Future outbound mobility programs can learn from the experience of this particular group of students and staff to make the most of an international learning in the workplace program. It has proved difficult to translate the practical work undertaken in New York neatly into each unit of competency as there was no clear picture of the teaching, learning and assessment needed to achieve the intended outcomes. This is not surprising as the context itself was fluid and demanded flexibility. Clear processes are needed to adapt the units to particular situations, modes and contexts and the facilitation of teachers to create their customised solutions to training package issues. One of the issues is the emphasis of funding leading to accreditation - assessment based on the performance - rather than an assessment of the learners' ability to deal with contingency issues. With any pilot program there will be a degree of confusion, uncertainty and challenges. Questions will arise about how to measure, what is important to measure and what is not. On the positive side, the pilot program for the School of Service Industries offered an opportunity to engage in innovative practice, designing learning pathways and more holistic learning and assessment approaches. Even though in this case there was not a clear translation to the unit of competency, the program took into account the students' current competency, their needs and their learning and work contexts.

There needs to be a better alignment of units of competencies' from a WIL experience to accreditation. This could be improved in two ways: first by creating generic units for students when enrolling with the intention of undertaking an international placement. This concept could also be used across all training packages. The second improvement involves improving the links between the Australian Qualifications Framework and international training frameworks. This would allow for comparisons and facilitate international benchmarking (AIM, 2010).

It could be useful if future programs look at the funding issues that impacted on the 2012 program and develop a continued effort to prevent these issues from impacting on future programs. Given there has been a submission made to go to London Fashion Week in 2013, it might be helpful if the project had an infrastructure to help subsidise all of the participants and a project plan inclusive of a time line and contingencies. The data analysis indicates a lack of funding for project design and delivery, teacher support and innovative and technological support. The research findings also indicated dissatisfaction with the limited amount of shows for the make-up students which impacted on the reduced amount of learning opportunities.

Finally, despite a range of issues, overall, students indicated satisfaction with the opportunity to be part of New York Fashion Week. Even with their role being limited to 'observing and assisting' at the event, they spoke positively about their learning experience. The findings suggest that students would recommend this project to future VU students.

Conclusion

This paper has covered the methodology, participant selection, funding and the assessment process involved in the project. This outbound mobility program offered the students a cultural and social working environment where students' employability skills, such as problem solving, team work, and communication skills were challenged and developed. Whilst VU intends to expand this project to further diversify VU's program offerings and be an effective marketing tool to increase local student enrolments, there are some funding impediments to overcome. It is hoped that some of the lessons learned and insights offered in this research project on the pilot program will be useful to these goals for VU and for other VET institutions looking to offer similar opportunities.

Acknowledgements

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