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Steering Towards the Internationalisation of Higher Education: Lessons From Pedagogical Interventions in Overseas Experiential Learning Programmes

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Recommended Citation:

Mukhopadhyay, K., Balachandran, L., Wong S. F., Lai, J. C. Y., Tan, A. X. Y., McGahan, K., Toh T. C., Wong, R., & Tan L. Y. (2022). Steering towards the internationalisation of higher education: Lessons from pedagogical interventions in overseas experiential learning programmes. *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 12(1), 20-38.
<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.123158>

ABSTRACT

Learning opportunities in tertiary levels, as part of internationalising education, promote awareness of a complex multicultural world and prepare students to meet contemporary global challenges. Drawing on our experience from 18 overseas study trips in Asia, Africa and Europe, this paper shows how the internationalisation of higher education (IHE) is operationalised through pedagogical interventions in short-term overseas learning programmes for undergraduates in an Asian university. The interventions included a combination of pre-trip seminars, reflection and debrief exercises, and building relationships with community partners, which included field trips to enable students to have immersive experiences in a myriad of cultural and societal settings. Using a qualitative directed content analysis method, we examined the impact of these programmes on student learning over time. The analysis of student journals, photo reflection essays and post-trip reports from three different overseas study trips during a stipulated period of time generated the following key themes: scaffolded learning allowed students to explore and critically examine connections between theory and practice while developing intercultural understanding, self-awareness and awareness of others, and skills to collaborate with diverse communities. Using these findings, a pedagogical model was developed for informing best practice in IHE. Lastly, considering the COVID-19 pandemic and unpredictable times, we present self-reflections of pioneer faculty members of the programme to highlight how such pedagogical models can facilitate and/or be reconfigured to sustain the relevance of IHE in creating new learning platforms amidst uncertain and unpredictable times.

Keywords: Overseas study trips/experiential learning, pedagogical interventions, intercultural knowledge, reflective learning, internationalisation of higher education

INTRODUCTION

Education philosopher Kurt Hahn posits that “there exists in everyone a grand passion, an outlandish thirst for adventure, a desire to live boldly and vividly in the journey through life”, and that this grand passion “must be embraced in wholesome ways... (and) would require more than a school in the traditional sense” (James, 2000, pp. 8-9). When we as educators in institutes of higher learning internationalise education by pushing the boundaries of teaching beyond the classroom, in particular crossing geographical borders, we realise that student learning expands beyond mere instructional content. In transforming into active, passionate, and engaged learners, students become agents of their own learning. Global literature has documented how pedagogies situated in experiential and reflective approaches (Lovett, 2020; Backman et al., 2019; Coker et al., 2017; Vesely et al., 2017; Roberts, 2012; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Moon, 2004) drive student motivation. When these pedagogies are used in overseas study trips for tertiary students, they become a key facet of the internationalisation of higher education (IHE). This paper elaborates how IHE is operationalised in short-term study trips and the learning enhancements they accrue to students in the context of a living-and-learning programme within an Asian university. Furthermore, it reflects how the use of particular intentional pedagogies generate shared learning despite each overseas study trip being curated around different themes.

IHE is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Apart from overseas learning trips, this process encompasses wide-ranging goals and priorities such as increased recruitment of foreign students and faculty within departments, cooperation between international institutions through research and education partnerships, development of branch campuses, and development of short-term exchange programmes for faculty and staff, with the overall objective of increasing the institution’s operating revenue, institutional competitiveness, and global reputation (Stone, 2006). In recent years, the multicultural and international dimensions have become more prominent in higher education (Yemini & Sagie, 2016; Gao, 2017), focusing even on internationalisation at home, where the emphasis is on integrating the learning of intercultural dimensions for all students from local environments into formal and informal curricula (Beelen & Jones, 2017).

When considering opportunities for students to learn beyond borders, IHE scholars broadly agree that it promotes awareness and understanding of individual responsibilities to meet the contemporary challenges of a globalised, interdependent, and multicultural world (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Stone, 2006; Garcel-Ávila, 2005). However, two central questions of such IHE practice need attention in order for international engagements to achieve their goals. The first relates to the length of time required. Gao (2015) emphasised that exposure to international experiences benefits students regardless of its duration. For instance, even weeklong study-abroad programmes, including cross-border education by “moving people, processes, pedagogies or entities across national lines” (Knight, 2012, p. 12), have been known to “develop intercultural competence skills such as willingness to take risks, patience, sensitivity, flexibility, open-mindedness, humility, respect and creativity” (de Wit & Jones, 2018, p. 17). The second relates to the development of different repertoires in ways of communication, knowledge construction, and creating beliefs and value. This calls for incorporating IHE dimensions in the curriculum of cross-border learning programmes. Scholars like Leask (2015) add that the “incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a programme” (p. 9) can prepare university students to be internationally knowledgeable and interculturally competent (Knight, 2004, 2012).

In a review by Stone and Petrick (2013) which investigated the educational benefits of overseas experiences, it was clear that the motivations and theory of IHE from the institutional and academic perspective are well-researched. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of data in the literature investigating students’ perceptions of their own learning experience as well as instructors’ pedagogical reflections through the lens of

internationalisation in short/long-term study trips, exchange programmes, internships or community projects abroad. In this paper, we specifically discuss the practice of IHE through short-term overseas study trips offered in a residential college (hereafter referred to as ‘the College’) and its impact on student learning. The College provides a living and learning programme for undergraduates from different disciplines, primarily in their first two years of study. Students in the College learn and engage with different issues and communities as they participate in the formal and informal curricula anchored in the ethos of active citizenship and community engagement. Study trips, particularly those organised under the university’s Study Trips for Engagement and EnRichment (STEER) programme, are organised with an interdisciplinary curriculum encompassing a broad range of intellectual themes, field visits and real-world experiences. Through the experiential learning in STEERs, students have direct experiences and interactions with different communities and stakeholders, and can draw comparative inferences between theoretical knowledge and actual practice.

We operationalised IHE by integrating global and intercultural dimensions (Knight, 2003) into 18 STEER trips to the Balkans, Botswana, Eastern Europe, India, Myanmar, and Nepal between 2012 and 2020. Each STEER, led by a group of faculty members (some of whom are authors of this paper), have incorporated reflective and reflexive learning¹ (Cunliffe, 2009, 2016) in an intercultural setting where students were “immersed in real, not simulated, experiences in which they come face to face with a wide range of new, exciting, challenging, and sometimes scary and exasperating experiences... (and) exercise their emotional flexibility and resiliency” (Savicki, 2008, p. 74). Placing students “away from...normal circumstances, in a new environment where there is a focus on reflection, personal development and self-awareness”, has been useful in helping them “think more deeply about themselves, their goals in life”. (Bentley, 1998, p. 85). Further, the STEERs offered “real-world experience and credibility” by engaging both local and overseas community partners, who helped to “lead stimulating discussions” (Meyers & Jones, 1993, p. 133) and enliven the experiential learning.

This paper will firstly present the pedagogical interventions in STEERs that define our IHE, namely pre-trip seminars, reflection and debrief exercises, and building relationships with community partners. We recognise that the internationalisation process entails not just knowledge creation but also the development of varied perceptions and enhancement of emotional capacities, which is achieved through these interventions. All three aspects of learning—knowledge, perceptions, emotions—matter, and are captured as empirical evidence in the students’ reflections which are documented through learning journals, blogs and photo reflection essays across the different STEERs. These reflections are analysed through a qualitative case study design, and the findings provide rich examples of how students gain intercultural knowledge, attitude, and competency through structured pedagogies that facilitate reflection and adaptation. The case study findings are presented thematically, and a resultant conceptual framework is presented in the second part of the paper. Furthermore, the travel curbs during the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to reflect on how the conceptual framework can facilitate and/or be reconfigured to sustain IHE’s relevance in the College, either by building new repertoires or adapting to the demands of new settings. The third and final part of the paper will pursue this discussion by presenting the self-reflections of selected pioneer faculty members (this paper’s co-authors) with more experience in the academic design and leading of the STEERs, using a dialogic approach to respond to the broader implications of the unique contributions of our pedagogies for the future of internationalisation in our context.

STEER PROGRAMMES AND THE PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

The pedagogical structure of the College STEERs comprises a pre-trip component that includes seminar-style sessions and local field visits, culminating in a 12- to 18-day overseas trip with groups of 15 to 40 students. They learn about contemporary social, economic and political issues through immersive experiences with different communities and stakeholders in a myriad cultural and societal settings. Our analysis of the STEERs from 2012 revealed that the study trips offered students an interactive learning opportunity that combined theory, classroom discussions, and field visits. For instance, pedagogical interventions included the choice of community partners and field site visits that were consciously curated around context-specific themes. The following describes three different STEERs conducted in 2018:

- STEER Myanmar took students to various places (e.g., Yangon, Inle Lake, and Kalaw) to explore social and economic issues, migration and migrant workers, and environmental conservation discussed during pre-trip sessions.
- STEER Nepal, based on the theme “Development, Dilemmas, Design”, engaged with the ACAP², among other partners reflecting on the concepts, practices and issues related to economic and environment-related development through multidisciplinary perspectives, and a special focus on social innovation discussed during pre-trip sessions.
- STEER Botswana incorporated the theme “Education, Economy and Environment”, which exposed students to different experiences through museum visits, safari tours, and engaging with conservation groups, schools and Asian companies in Botswana, reflecting on the connections between these aspects in a developing society.

The emphasis on the experiential approach stems from the firm belief that experience is a cornerstone that provides maximum learning opportunities for students (Savicki, 2008). However, for learning to occur in this “river of experience” (Roberts, 2012, p. 8), a mediated learning experience is necessary (Moon, 2004) and can be created through intentional pedagogical interventions. We focus on three of the key pedagogical interventions adopted and developed in the College STEERs—pre-trip seminars, reflection and debrief exercises, and building relationships with community partners—to meet the following learning objectives:

- building intercultural knowledge which helps in building “the ability to interact with people from different cultures so as to optimise the probability of mutually successful outcomes” (Stone, 2006, p. 338);
- developing self-awareness and awareness of others through openness, reflectiveness, and sensitivity; and
- cultivating skills like trust building, ethical judgement, and compassion to collaborate with diverse communities

Figure 1 shows the three key pedagogical interventions and their goals and strategies adopted to meet the College STEERs' learning objectives.

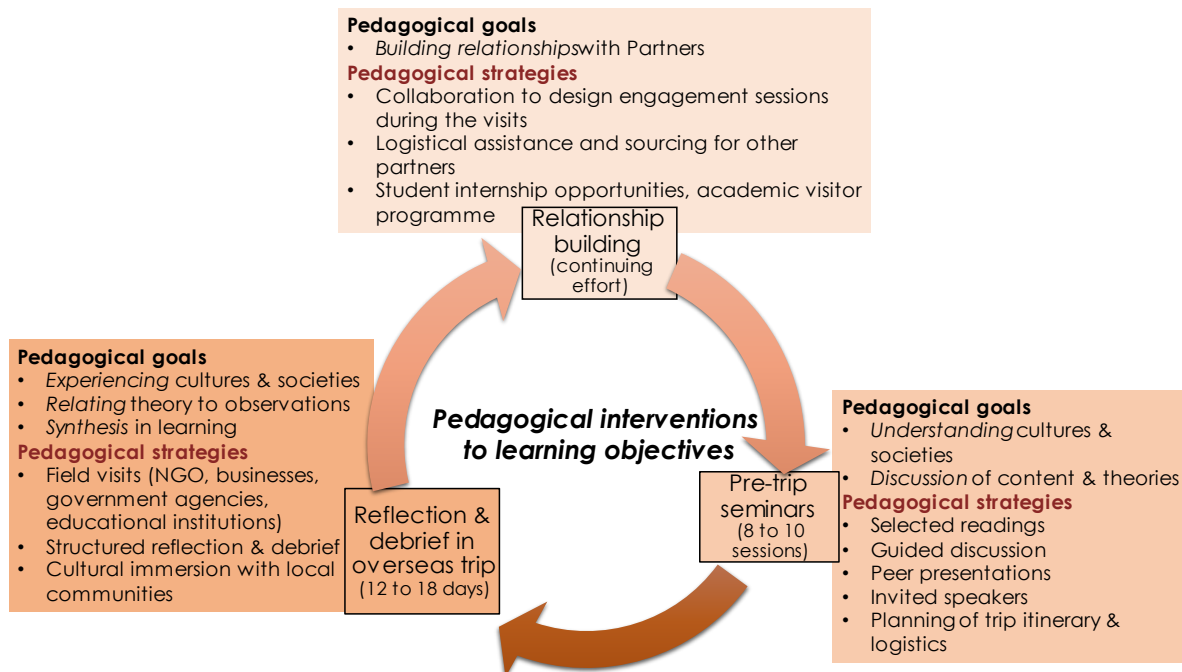


Figure 1. Pedagogical interventions and learning objectives of the College STEER programme.

Pre-trip seminars

The pre-trip seminars have been instrumental in priming students for intercultural learning, done primarily by giving students agency and building a learning partnership with them. Students research the various STEER sites not only as geographical regions and culturally different societies, but also to gather information that contextualises the work and roles of different partner organisations, including civil society groups, public and private institutions, social and commercial enterprises as well as local communities. They then share their findings and insights as well as discuss key concepts and issues through oral presentations (Figure 2), which are revisited during the trips and applied to real-world experiences. The students can be creative in their approach and source for interesting readings, films and even their own friends who know the country's cultural landscape well, getting them to share their experiences and make the content internationally relevant (Zou et. al., 2020a). In addition to student presentations, we introduced guest speakers to provide different perspectives to supplement learning.

This partnership between students and instructors helps create a shared ownership over STEERs that extends beyond the curriculum, where our students are assigned different roles. These roles help them become active STEER participants, understand the thinking and planning process behind a study trip, and learn skills beyond the classroom while working in teams responsible for leadership, finances, logistics, photography, or communication. The experience, while challenging for some students, has been purposefully framed as a learning objective so that students know that they have to take charge of their delegated roles with faculty guidance.

Reflection and debrief exercises

Through mediated experiential learning, the trips provide students with mobility and international exposure, and are designed to enhance students' intercultural competence by including cultural content, continual reflection on experiences of engaging with the culture, and intercultural learning (Zou et. al., 2020a; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). Underpinning this experiential learning is the element of community engagement embedded in our STEER pedagogy. For instance, through purposeful and intentional interactions with the locals, students catch a glimpse of their lives and the challenges they face in their cultural context. The engagements spanned from formal seminars and site visits, to shared meals, sports, and dances with community members.

The pedagogical intervention of using reflections and daily debrief exercises in the STEERs (Figure 2) helped to “reconstruct and make meaning of our experience” (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p. 3). They provide the ‘intellectual framing’ necessary for a meaningful experience (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 108), reinforcing an integrated and effective learning through cultural engagements and varied reflection activities (Stevens & Cooper, 2009). To reinforce the learning that took place through active engagement with different communities in various cultural settings, different methods were employed to help students reflect on the theoretical concepts, practices and interactions encountered to “integrate and apply course content, practice skills, and develop insights and new perspectives”, and were “an effective way of accomplishing key learning objectives” (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, pp. 8-9).

As students reflected on the different experiences, they were able to “transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious” (Dewey, as cited in Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p. 21), and be prepared for a globalised world (Zou et. al., 2020a).

Building relationships with community partners

As an intentional pedagogy, we invested in building relationships with our community partners across the different STEERs (Figure 2). Deliberate choices were made in the selection of partners and, our students' engagement activities were designed based on the conversations with them. We focused on three main attributes—credibility, approachability, and resourcefulness—in selecting and developing programmes with our community partners. Throughout our STEERs, they assisted with numerous aspects of the trips, including the planning of logistics, sourcing for other partners, and facilitating the engagement sessions between our students and the different communities. Further, as students engaged in constructive debates and critical thinking by visiting these community partners, the experiences broadened their perspectives, changed their worldviews and enabled growth in terms of intercultural knowledge, self-awareness, and awareness of others (Zou et. al., 2020a, 2020b; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012; Bentley, 1998). Through these pedagogies, the College STEERs have strived to promote critical thinking and prepare students to be internationally knowledgeable and culturally competent (Stone, 2006).



Figure 2. Photos³ depicting pre-trip seminars, reflection and debrief exercises, and collaboration with partners.

THE STEER CASE STUDY

As reflective educators, we were interested in investigating whether the pedagogical interventions adopted enhanced students' accomplishment of the College STEER programme's intended learning objectives. The consequence of drawing on a set of intentional pedagogies makes a compelling case that overseas study trips can generate shared epistemological advancements among students by foregrounding internationalisation, despite each STEER being curated around different academic themes as indicated above. The data was obtained from students' reflections in their learning journals, photo reflection essays and reports from three STEERs—STEER Myanmar (66 reflections based on post-trip field reports from trips held between 2017 to 2019), STEER Nepal (38 photo reflection essays from two trips in 2018 and 2019), and STEER Botswana (one collective post-STEER report from 2018). The rationale for choosing these STEERs for the case study was two-fold. Firstly, they were not credit-bearing modules and hence ensconced within the informal curriculum with no pressures of formal assessment. Secondly, the time period chosen indicates that students in these different STEERs belonged to the same cohort, enabling an analysis based on a common period across different STEERs. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the students who went on the three STEERs by year of the trip, gender, year of study, and discipline.

Drawing on qualitative-directed content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), we used the College STEER's learning objectives—building intercultural knowledge, developing self-awareness and awareness of others, and cultivating skills (soft skills)—as thematic codes, and deductively analysed the relationship between the intentional pedagogies and the learning objectives. The analysis highlighted the dynamic interplay between teaching and learning, particularly confirming the affordances of IHE in helping students understand the value of such short-term overseas learning opportunities, and the importance of applying the knowledge gained in contributing productively to society.

Table 1
STEER students 2017-19–gender, year of study, discipline.

Year	Gender		Year of study			Discipline	
	Female	Male	First year	Second year	Year 3 & above	STEM*	Non-STEM
STEER Myanmar							
2017	10	12	14	5	3	7	15
2018	9	12	6	11	4	9	12
2019	15	7	4	15	3	9	13
STEER Nepal							
2018	12	7	10	8	1	10	9
2019	8	12	9	10	1	5	15
STEER Botswana							
2018	18	17	15	15	5	14	21

* STEM stands for “Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics”

Findings

The distribution of the numbers in Table 1 across the variables of gender, year of study, and discipline clearly shows that the sample under study is representative of the College population. There is a fair balance in gender distribution among the STEER participants over these three years. Further, the diversity among students in terms of their years of study, or being in STEM or non-STEM, is also evident. Analysing the case study data using the internationalisation lens illuminated three key themes: building intercultural knowledge, developing awareness of self and others, and acquiring skills for collaboration with diverse communities.

Intercultural knowledge

The significance of this theme is evident across the STEERs to Myanmar, Nepal, and Botswana, where several students noted the sense of developing intercultural awareness. Further, many found their preconceived perceptions challenged, having gained an appreciation of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), which not only included achieving awareness of political, economic and cultural similarities and differences, but also nurtured the development of emotional capacities to efficaciously interact with people of other cultures. Students from STEER Botswana and STEER Nepal, for instance, documented positive intercultural experiences that illuminated their ethnocentrism and allowed them to appreciate the nuanced cultural perspectives in these societies (Baldwin, et. al., 2014). Figure 3 captures the evidence from students’ sharing across different STEERs.

“Many ... still held onto traditional notions of Africa ... as ... being Third World in the economic sense and underdeveloped as a whole, yet by the end, we left with changed perspectives and came to understand that this was not the case” (STEER Botswana 2018)

“... valuable aspects of the Nepalese culture such as hospitality as well as learning to be patient and less uptight are traits which can be universally applicable and transcend beyond the boundaries of a nation” (STEER Nepal 2019).

“The passion and resilience displayed by the Nepalese is something that I kept in mind throughout the trip. ...recognition of the abundant diversity of cultures in Nepal allowed us to respect and embrace our various cultural differences” (STEER Nepal 2019).

Figure 3. Building intercultural knowledge (1).

For STEER Myanmar, both formal sessions—with partner organisations such as the Singapore Embassy, International Organisation for Migration, and Inle Heritage Foundation—and informal sessions—conversations with local college students and connections made on public transport or market exchanges—helped glean insights from seemingly mundane encounters; such happenstances might include a visit to a local hospital or village sundry store (Figure 4).

“Through visiting ... and interacting with the locals in depth ... we could better understand the insights behind the spatial-temporal impacts of multiple forces (political, economic, social, environmental) across Myanmar.”
(STEER Myanmar 2018).

Figure 4. Building intercultural knowledge (2).

These led to further insights about broader social issues, such as social inequality along the axes of gender, ethnicity, geography and migratory trends, and how these issues were addressed in such societies (Figure 5).

“While there seemed to still be traditional gender roles at work especially in rural areas of Myanmar, it was amazing to meet with a steady stream of female leaders and entrepreneurs ... As a young, female student, this was overwhelmingly inspiring and empowering ... it was amazing to observe how the ... social enterprises ... took purposeful steps at improving their communities”
(STEER Myanmar 2018)

Figure 5. Building intercultural knowledge (3).

Awareness of self and others

The awareness of self and others was developed as students explored the ethical boundaries of different cultures, and critically examined debates on theory and praxis while reflecting on intercultural understanding (Mills, et. al., 2010). Importantly, some reflections further suggested that students internalised aspects of these themes and applied those insights to their lives in Singapore—demonstrating an awareness of self and others in society. Beyond appreciating general socio-cultural understandings, many students brought concepts ranging from kindness, civic consciousness to environmental conversations back to Singapore. They also aspired to actively apply what they had learned to their personal experiences, reflecting an awareness of self and others commensurate with becoming more informed and responsible citizens (Figure 6).

“We spoke about how the people of Myanmar are so nice and how that might be because we are tourists but I saw them being just as nice to each other on the Circular [train system in Yangon]. If we can be half as kind, friendly, and selfless, I think Singapore would be a much better place.”
(STEER Myanmar 2019)

“From the organizations that we met and the individuals who introduced their work to us, a civic consciousness and passion for the country and community they were serving was so apparent. This was something that I felt was missing in Singapore and I was puzzled as to why that was the case.”
(STEER Nepal 2019)

“Thinking back on what the youths at HCI [Himalayan Climate Initiative, Kathmandu, Nepal] shared, it struck something in me to see these people, who were around my age, sacrificing certain aspects of life like travelling overseas and having long hair, for the environment ... and ... shared about how small simple things were little steps in the bigger picture. I thought about it more when I came back to Singapore and though I may not be as brave to cut my hair like one of the presenters, I realised that there are things I can do as well. For example, taking the public transport instead of Grab”
(STEER Nepal 2019).

Figure 6. Developing awareness of self and others.

Skills for collaboration

Following from the earlier theme, the translatability of worldviews in other societies extend to recognising how such trips facilitate the acquisition of skills that enable educational advancement. This meant that the intercultural communication opportunities in STEERs not only enhanced emotional competencies, but also offered students pathways to an enhanced higher education (Figure 7).

“Seeing how the youths ... innovate and stand up for their rights as global citizens inspired me to start doing the same back home. I was always unclear of my future path and if I want to merge my interest in environmental sustainability with my Communications and New Media degree, but this trip has definitely pushed me in that direction. Perspectives in my mind have shifted”
(STEER Nepal 2019).

Figure 7. Acquiring skills for collaboration (1).

Some students indicated that they learned some basic language skills (and even desired more of such skills) that they applied to glean social and cultural understandings. These were also highlighted as possible pedagogical suggestions for future STEERs. For instance, one student expressed that: “In order to improve communication and to show our sincerity in connecting with them, we could have some basic Burmese lessons to better prepare ourselves for the trip. During the trip itself, without any background in Burmese, I learnt from the students some basic Burmese phrases and how to write the Burmese numerals.” (STEER Myanmar 2017)

A study based on pre-departure and post-return focus groups with students who participated in short-term study tours at an Australian university concluded that the main benefits included increased confidence from ‘pushing the boundaries’, improved interpersonal skills, and clearer perception of career goals, particularly in relation to working overseas (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017). These were also echoed in the narratives of STEER Nepal participants (Figure 8).

“By understanding that different countries will have different priorities, it will be easier to keep an open mind and actually enjoy the process of working abroad, and appreciate the diverse cultures”
(STEER Nepal 2019)

“The constant need to observe and analyse ... will be something I will take away and apply ... everywhere ... from now on” (STEER Nepal 2019).

“An important skill I gained ... was the ability to be flexible in my thinking. When tackling problems, we tend to stick to a few set model ways of doing things. However, I learnt that big problems do not necessarily require big solutions. Rather, we should be open to innovating and trying novel solutions”
(STEER Nepal 2019).

“This overseas programme has heightened my curiosity and interests to see how developing countries, like Nepal, will progress in terms of development in the near future. Now, I am very open to having a global career ... A career overseas will challenge me, and I wouldn’t feel so bounded especially in developing countries, because there are just endless possibilities and areas for me to tap on and improve”
(STEER Nepal 2019)

Figure 8. Acquiring skills for collaboration (2).

Discussion

Based on the learning achieved through our STEERs in their different foci, as indicated by the three themes found from this case study, a pedagogical model of the three key interventions shows how IHE can be practised effectively, especially in short-term overseas learning contexts (Figure 9). While pre-trip seminars focus on student agency and responsibility so that experience can be morphed into meaningful learning, reflecting and debriefing enable students to make connections between theory and practice. Additionally, building relationships through collaborations with overseas community partners lends authenticity to the learning experience.

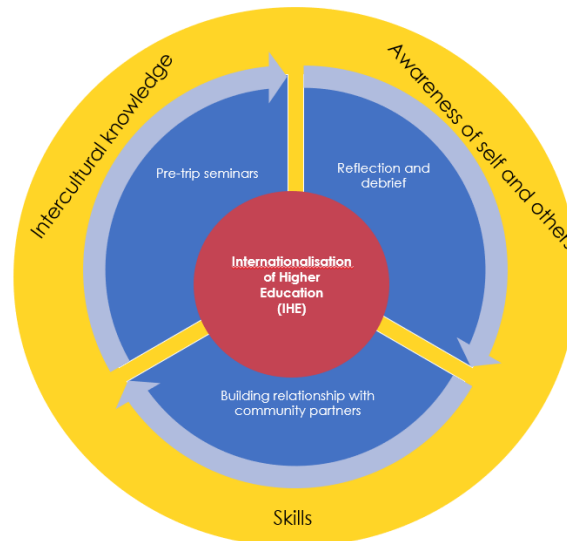


Figure 9. Pedagogical model of effective IHE practice.

INTERNATIONALISATION AND THE EVOLVING NATURE OF STEERS

The College STEERs have built an evolving structure over time by reflecting on and sharing knowledge of best practices that different instructors have employed to enhance learning. STEERs are dynamic and vary from year to year. Thus, developing the key pedagogical framework has ensured consistency and allowed other faculty members to come onboard to conduct such trips. The structuring has also built the necessary scaffolding to bring our students from diverse disciplines to a common and basic level of knowledge of the destination countries. For instance, having the daily reflection and debriefing sessions during STEER trips helped raise students' awareness and understanding of, and engagement with, social issues at home and abroad.

Our continued reflection and evaluation of the practice of internationalisation in the College STEERs have aligned with the emerging research in this area that increasingly emphasises the need for a holistic approach to student learning that addresses the social dimensions of students' needs beyond the classroom, such as creating opportunities for internships or community projects abroad (Lee et al., 2021; Knight, 1994), as well as providing related institutional support structures (Bedenlier et al., 2018). STEERs have always adopted an inclusive approach and over time expanded the scope of student learning by creating internship⁴ opportunities through partnerships built during the trips. Box 1 describes an internship programme in Botswana, the first internship created through the College STEERs. The internship helped to achieve the outcomes of cultivating intercultural awareness and skills to collaborate with diverse communities.

BOX 1

During STEER Botswana 2018, we were actively looking out for potential internships for our students and explored the concept with a key partner – Delta Waters International School (DWIS). Internships are a ubiquitous feature in the university, but overseas internships are less common. Through this partnership, we hoped to provide our students with an opportunity to work overseas and gain a better appreciation of the culture and economic landscape in Botswana. Having an overseas partner who was willing to provide a safe environment for students to do meaningful work was a great opportunity. Further, at the institutional level, there was a push for students to gain international exposure that would encourage them to step out of their home country to learn more about other countries. Overseas internships were financially supported by both the university and national policies to defray overseas expenses. These supporting measures substantially lowered the barrier for students to consider overseas internships.

The STEER Botswana inaugural team internship comprised 8 students who worked at DWIS for 5 weeks. Their job scope included lesson planning and delivery, and the topics spanned from the Sciences to Arts, and included both in and out of classroom learning. Our student shared that they valued the “*self-directed and peer learning in this internship*” and the opportunities to “*immerse in the community and culture*”. The teachers at DWIS highlighted that the interns gave their students the “*opportunities to learn different perspectives and the world around them*”. The feedback encouraged and spurred the STEER team to continue planning for more internships with our partners.

[Quotes extracted from post-internship report, STEER Botswana 2018.]



Our students enjoying a game of basketball at Delta Waters International School

FUTURE OF INTERNATIONALISATION IN STEERS

The internationalisation element in the College STEERs was heavily dependent on travelling across borders to provide authentic learning for students in collaboration with our overseas community partners. A substantial amount of time was invested in visiting the places and organisations where students engaged in meaningful intercultural learning. We have been conducting STEERs annually since 2012 until the COVID-19 pandemic that brought with it various safety regulations, including a moratorium on travel. Overseas study trips have been cancelled since the start of 2020. STEER Balkans and STEER Botswana were ongoing at that point with their pre-trip sessions. STEER Nepal and STEER Myanmar were in the planning stage for the following semester. All trips were thwarted or completely cancelled due to the pandemic, and challenges surfaced for the team to conceptualise new ways of running STEERs in a post-pandemic environment, and creating new platforms of learning.

A dialogue started among the STEER faculty team which aimed at making explicit both what ties our STEERs together and the broader implications of the unique contributions of each STEER. This dialogue was an opportunity to reflect on two vital questions:

- 1) As the scope of internationalisation of STEERs has changed dramatically, what would be the purpose, opportunities and challenges of the programme for the future? and
- 2) What would be the learning pathways for students in new platforms of internationalisation and would that learning continue to be transformative for students?

Self-reflections from the pioneering faculty members who spearheaded most STEERs and were also involved in its curricular design strongly suggested that our best strategies in these uncertain times would be to remain true to our pedagogical model of teaching and learning in STEERs (see Figure 1) and evaluate the effective pedagogies that can be adapted in the redesigned formats. These reflective conversations and the new platforms of STEER learning are described below. They highlight the significance of how reflecting on teaching and learning has allowed STEERs to evolve in creating rigorous and deeper meanings of internationalisation.

Reflective responses from pioneering faculty members

The College STEERs have always posited a critical approach in exploring the relationship between education, culture, and power to promote teaching social justice concepts where learners are challenged to examine power structures and patterns of inequality by engaging with the community, and fostering dialogue and reflections upon the world (Mayo, 1999). Community Engagement, a key part of the College's ethos, has guided our belief in STEERs, where effective student learning happens when students "...look beyond the classroom and see the world through another person's eyes..." (Tan & Chang-Koh, 2020, p. 21). Further, the pedagogies that the STEERs have established can build bridges, connecting the old and the new, and encourage us to go beyond the limitations imposed by the original tenets of the STEERs. Particular to note are the following:

- teaching moments—deeply predictable but highly destabilising and transformative—where students research, challenge assumptions, and change the questions being pursued through the combination of knowledge-gathering during pre-trip seminars and first-hand experiences during field visits
- scaffolding for learning—preparing students to think critically—converting their thinking into reflections, blogs, presentations and colloquia that enable learning and growth
- creating collaborative partnerships—with our community partners for the students—where respect and recognition are built into these collaborative spaces, and critiques circulate with rigour and inquiry to create responsible future endeavours.

STEERs have not been static. We have constantly evaluated and reflected on our pedagogies to help us grow, and build a rigorous programme with strong partnerships. A productive way to restate this is that careful, critical, and resource-rich structures bear testimony to our ability to redesign new formats of internationalisation of STEERs during COVID that can also continue in post-pandemic times. We discuss two key examples from STEER Myanmar and STEER Balkans to demonstrate the potential success of these new adaptations of IHE.

STEER Myanmar: Adapting a reading group to maintain links and focusing on the abroad at home

In the latter half of 2020, the STEER Myanmar programme was reconceptualised as a reading group not only because of the COVID-19 travel restrictions, but also the emerging political instability in the country that ended in the recent military coup. Consequently, STEER Myanmar was recast as a reading group, allowing us to continue collaborating with our partner organisations (e.g. Inle Heritage Foundation) and keep abreast of the evolving public health and political situation there. The reading group comprised eight weekly sessions which involved online interactions between the students, instructors, and partner organisations. In recent years, the multicultural and global dimensions of internationalisation have become more prominent, especially focused on internationalisation at home (Yemini & Sagie, 2016; Gao, 2017). Insights from this literature, for instance, guided us in structuring an engagement with the Myanmar community in our home country, where students were safely able to observe global socio-economic aspects of migrant communities from Myanmar in their own multi-ethnic society.

STEER Balkans: Virtual engagements to reveal cultural connections in post-conflict states

STEER Balkans challenged students to consider how multi-ethnic post-conflict states could develop a national identity, social trust and capital, and how a viable political and economic future could be built in new states in Southeastern Europe, a region unfamiliar to most College students. The students' affective connection to the content was raised in pre-trip seminars with guest talks by Balkan personalities who shared about their experiences growing up in Yugoslavia, national service, civil war, and genocide. An example was Aleks Duric, a Bosnian-born ethnic Serb, naturalised citizen of our home country, and former captain of the Singapore national football team. Prior experience had taught the efficacy of these experiences, like the horrors of war and genocide powerfully coming alive for students. Thus, learning was scaffolded to prime students for a potentially emotional learning experience by introducing them to readings, videos and talks by scholars and eyewitnesses to the Balkan or similar inter-ethnic wars, such as the one in Sri Lanka.

Post-programme student feedback (see Figure 10) from the two new STEER formats support the effectiveness of the conceptual model in the redesigned internationalisation in this context.

STEER Myanmar Reading Group 2020 Student Feedback

“Brought us on a virtual journey around Myanmar - delving into topics past the famous ASSK, into a bit of the history & geography of present-day Myanmar, which underpins quite a fair bit of the developments and challenges in contemporary Myanmar”

“I like how passionate the lecturers are about Myanmar and the different perspectives shared by different guest lecturers.”

Virtual STEER Balkans 2020 Student Feedback

“Being able to ‘meet’ people from Bosnia and hear from them. I like how we have to contact them as part of our final project outside of class and have the chance to speak more with them on a personal level.”

“In all honesty, I did not go into the Special Term sessions expecting much, having experienced how Zoom has generally been limited in comparison to ‘normal’ classroom learning. However, having now gone through them, I am genuinely grateful to have learnt a lot from meeting the speakers, hearing their stories and learning about the work they do. They are all passionate individuals, and the causes they champion are very much important in working towards reconciliation in their societies. In the process of preparing to host our guest speakers, I was also reminded of the importance of intentional networking and making meaningful connections, without which the entire course would have been very limited beyond theoretical learning. Simple things like trying to match presentations to suit their interests, doing test calls, and preparing questions all contribute to making them feel welcome and leaving a positive impression.”

Figure 10. Excerpts from student feedback.

CONCLUSION

By working as a multi-disciplinary team, we have employed intentional pedagogies in internationalisation practices through the College STEERs to promote knowledge-creation opportunities, generate learning impact on students, develop internship opportunities and create new platforms of sharing and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. These pedagogies and practices enabled students to develop greater intercultural understanding, self-awareness, and skills for collaboration. Our analysis of College STEERs particularly highlights the importance of rigorous pre-trip sessions as a key pedagogical strategy. It further demonstrates that well-crafted reflective and debriefing exercises during the trip enabled students to listen actively and ask constructive and critical questions. Building relationships with different community partners created authentic learning opportunities for the students to connect knowledge and experience, and to apply that beyond the study trips. To continue with these pedagogical elements amidst the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, we adapted IHE by collaborating with our overseas partners through virtual and interactive sessions, and converting some STEERs into new learning environments.

The College STEERs have not only transformed students but also us as educators. STEERs have given us many opportunities to learn alongside our students as well as meet authentic change-makers and lifelong innovators in different communities. We have also learnt to think critically about the elements at the heart of our students' experiences. Despite the challenges that we encounter as educators working with students and engaging with diverse communities, it is imperative that we remain focused on creating safe spaces and inclusive pedagogies that promote student agency and inspire students to challenge the status quo, and empower them to gain intercultural understanding and global awareness. We conclude with the words of a longstanding STEER faculty member, Tan Lai Yong:

“Bring a smile and work with the changes; ride the wave and peer ahead to influence its direction.”

ENDNOTES

1. Cunliffe (2016) distinguishes reflective learning as single-loop learning, that centres on making connections or developing new understandings of situations drawing on logic and rationality to apply theories to an objective empirical reality. Reflexive learning aligns with double-loop learning and takes a constructionist position that critically exposes contradictions, questions assumptions, values and theories revealing multiplicity in interpretations.
2. ACAP refers to the [Annapurna Conservation Area Project](#), Nepal.
3. All picture credits belong to the respective STEER teams and approvals have been sought from the participants during the programme/module for the use of pictures without identifying details in different reports and publications.
4. Details of the internship, including feedback from partners are found on these links: <https://capt.nus.edu.sg/events-highlights/captains-team-internship-in-botswana> and https://capt.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/convergence_final-compressed.pdf

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