

## THE CURRICULUM DESIGN AND EVALUATION OF A STUDY-ABROAD PROGRAM FOR ESP STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** The current paper reports on a case of the design and evaluation processes of a short-term study-abroad program (STSAP) that was held in 2019 in Hong Kong for Kanagawa Dental University (KDU) students. At the design stage, a multi-module system was adopted in order to meet a wide variety of needs of the participant students and help them develop (1) their English proficiency, (2) disciplinary (= dentistry) knowledge/skills, and (3) social/intercultural competence. The evaluation involved different types of data sources, in order to describe complex dimensions of the STSAP. The triangulation of the data gathered revealed that the participant students were overall satisfied with the multiple-module structure of the KDU STSAP curriculum. On the other hand, the affective and interpersonal dimensions of collaborative learning emerged as an issue that deserves attention and consideration for the development and re-designing of the KDU STSAP. It is suggested that the designer and coordinator should pay full attention to students' skills and resources for collaborating and managing their own learning in an unfamiliar environment.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum Design, Syllabus Design, ESP*

### INTRODUCTION

Short-term study abroad programs (STSAPs) have been increasing in popularity since the end of the 20th century (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Keese & O'Brien, 2011; Orpett Long et al., 2010), when globalization exploded together with the popularization of the Internet and Computer Technology. Different definitions have so far been given to STSAPs, depending on different conceptions of 'short-term', with the time frame ranging from a week to three months (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Gordon et al., 2009; Orpett Long et al., 2010). STSAPs particularly appeal more than longer-term programs to university students who do not want their participation in study-abroad programs disturbing their university course requirements and degrees (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). The more affordable and flexible programs attract university students, as an international experience has become highly valued in the globalized world (Mills et al., 2010) and global perspectives and social connections are appreciated as instrumental resources in the academia.

Study-abroad programs for undergraduate students have been reported to provide a range of educational benefits, including "developing global awareness and cross-cultural competence, more effective language learning, resume building and better preparation for graduate school" (Keese & O'Brien, 2011, p.3). STSAPs and their full range of potentials, on the other hand, have been understudied so far (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Many studies have focused on the development of foreign or second language proficiency through STSAPs, generating mixed results (Gao & Kennedy, 2019). Other studies have focused on intercultural communicative competence or global awareness (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Gao & Kennedy, 2019; Pittenger et al., 2019) as a benefit of STSAP. Students reportedly develop their ability to appreciate other cultures and deepen their global perspectives and sensitivity after a short stay in the target culture.

There is a wide range of varieties of STSAPs, with no standard or average format or design (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Although their potential as educational experiences are generally recognized, the design and delivery of study-abroad programs need to be given more attention (Mills et al., 2010). Details of what students actually experience in study-overseas programs have, in general, rarely been given due attention (Isabelli-García et al., 2018). The design and delivery of discipline-specific STSAP in the fields of medical and medicine-related disciplines has never been reported on to the knowledge of the current author. This paper aims to fill these gaps.

## CURRICULUM AND SYLLABUS DESIGN

The design of the KDU Short-term Study-Abroad Program (KDU STSAP) was staged in two parts. Initially, the general objectives of the program were set up and the overall program or curriculum framework was defined. Secondly, syllabuses and activities were specified and negotiated to meet the general objectives.

### Defining General Objectives for KDU STSAP

Kanagawa Dental University (KDU) is a private university dedicated to dentistry education, with more than 700 students enrolled in its undergraduate studies. It is located in Yokosuka, Japan, which hosts the U.S. Naval Base and boasts a unique intercultural atmosphere with more than 10,000 of U.S. military personnel and their families. Also, KDU accepts international students from neighboring Asian countries, who constitute nearly 20% of the student population. In this distinctively international setting, KDU has set up various supporting channels for students who are highly motivated to learn English. KDU STSAP is one of them.

In July 2018, KDU embarked on designing a two-week overseas program for KDU students. The original idea came up in 2017, when KDU accepted requests from four Hong Kong University students for a one-week stay in Yokosuka and experiential learning at KDU. At this time, the Hong Kong University students observed the KDU educational and clinical facilities and enjoyed opportunities to develop social connections with KDU students as well as make excursions around the local area. Their focus in their visit to KDU was on expanding their intercultural and disciplinary competence. Accompanying the Hong Kong University students while they observed the KDU facilities, the current author had chances to develop awareness of the students' perceptions of study-abroad programs and their needs. It was especially inspiring to know how their disciplinary knowledge and skills as dental students would help them enter into an unfamiliar environment and community with curiosity and open-mindedness. During the tours to various facilities such as KDU hospital and clinical skills development rooms, the Hong Kong University students showed their highest engagement and curiosity, and they kept asking questions regarding the educational and clinical practices in KDU and Japan. This experience of being a host to students from another country led to the development of a short-term study-abroad program for KDU students.

Inspired by Grave's circular model of curriculum design (Graves, 2000, in Nation and Macallister, 2010), the interim goals and objectives of the KDU STSAP were initially formulated. Two pillars were set up at this point: *English proficiency development* and *discipline-specific experiential learning*. Unlike the Hong Kong University students, whose instructional medium is English in their university so they use English on daily basis, most KDU students were not equipped with the level of English proficiency enough to self-manage their own visits to English speaking countries. Since the KDU STSAP should be open, in principle, to any KDU student interested in visiting foreign countries, English proficiency development was justified to be included as an integral part of the KDU STSAP.

Needs Analysis or needs assessment is an essential component of language curriculum and syllabus design (Basturkmen, 2012; Flowerdew, 2013; Graves, 2000; Nation and Macallister, 2020). In the current design of the study-abroad program, needs analysis procedures were taken to see if the interim objectives of the program might meet the perceived needs of potential participants and faculty members.

In the course of needs analyses through multiple talks with students and faculty members, information was gathered as to what they wanted from a study-overseas program. The initial two constructs were negotiated, and another major program objective was added, as a result of the needs analyses. Three constructs were thus finally generated: (1) *English for Specific Purposes (ESP) proficiency development*, (2) *disciplinary knowledge/skill development*, and (3) *cross-cultural social connections*. The reason behind setting up an ESP course, rather than a general English learning course, is that the program needs to be differentiated from the ordinary KDU English courses, which are provided as compulsory courses for all the first- and second-year students to develop their general English proficiency. Program participants can learn through materials relevant to their own discipline, i.e. dentistry, which was expected to motivate them all the more to learn English. As for (3), KDU faculty members informed a lot. Those who had experienced studying in overseas countries for sabbatical leaves unanimously told how their social connections were developed during their stay in other countries and how those interpersonal resources helped with their second-language development as well as their research skills advancement. The current author, as the program designer, strongly agreed with this view, based on his own experiences as a second language learner.

With these three general objectives, the program should provide the condition in which participants will develop English proficiency in a way that is relevant to dentistry-related activities, observe and experience different ways of dentistry education and clinical practices, and make bonds with students in the host university, so that their social connections will last even after the program is

over. While these constructs were highlighted for the grand design of KDU STSAP, other ‘background’ objectives were also put in the list of perceived needs. One of them, ‘active and collaborative engagement’, was set up because program participants are required to manage a range of aspects of learning on their own in a foreign country away from their familiar educational settings and supports. ‘Tourism fun’ was another one, which was included as an essential part of any travel to other countries.

### Designing the Program Syllabus

In an initial attempt to operationalize the three core objectives into syllabi, it was found that the design and operation of KDU STSAP needed to be collaborated with multiple different local coordinators in the program venue. Since the program would be dentistry-oriented, several overseas universities that provide dentistry education were firstly approached as potential program venues. We hoped that a host university would have the capacity to coordinate both language and disciplinary education for our students, which meant that least two divisions of a university (language teaching and dentistry education) would be required as local coordinators. Negotiating through various communicative channels with different universities in the space of fifteen months, it was finally decided that Hong Kong University (HKU) was the best candidate as the venue for KDU STSAP in spring 2019. The advantages of this university over other promising venues were that (1) KDU had already established social networks with HKU Dentistry faculty members and (2) HKU Dentistry Department had extensive experiences of accepting international students for their short visits, and (3) there was a language teaching section in HKU dedicated to designing and operating language learning programs for students from overseas countries. This section also had extensive experiences of teaching English in qualification courses for dental technicians and hygienists.

Besides these affordances for our program design, other factors were also taken into consideration: (4) Hong Kong’s locational advantages and easy access from Japan, (5) cultural and linguistic similarities between Japan and Hong Kong, (6) the research and educational excellence of HKU Dentistry Department, and most importantly (7) the well-established status of English as a communicative medium in Hong Kong.

Once local coordinators were decided, the concept of the module system was then introduced to address the three different constructs (*ESP proficiency development*, *disciplinary knowledge/skill development*, and *cross-cultural social connections*). The idea was to segment each weekday into three timeframes (morning, afternoon, and evening) during the program, and assign each of the three constructs to a different timeframe. The final arrangement of modules was decided as the morning for *ESP proficiency development*, the afternoon for *disciplinary knowledge/skill development*, and the evening for *cross-cultural social connections*. The local coordinators were asked to be in charge of the syllabus design and operation for the morning *ESP proficiency development* and afternoon *disciplinary knowledge/skill development* modules.

The evening *cross-cultural social connections* module was designed in cooperation between the program coordinator (=the current author) and student participants. Four activities were prepared to make sure that KDU students could establish strong social bonds with Hong Kong people. The outlines of activities for this module were initially set up by the program coordinator, utilizing his own social networks in Hong Kong. The module design was then negotiated, developed, and self-managed by participant students themselves. The program coordinator took the role of supervisors over students’ decision-making processes and gave feedback if needed. In one of the activities designed for this module, KDU students would go on a short excursion to visit another university in Hong Kong and make oral presentations on the Japanese subculture (e.g. Japanese comic, youth culture, fashion, etc.) in front of the local students. KDU students themselves contacted academic staff of this local university to make this event happen, discussed details, and managed their preparations and operations together with the local university staff. Students thus performed the role of the program co-coordinators of this module. Active and collaborative engagement skills were expected to be developed as a result.

In these different design processes, the program coordinator was kept in the loop on the development of each syllabus and monitored the balance among the three modules with particular reference to time affordances/constraints and work-load. The module timeframes were then sometimes relaxed to meet various perceived needs, by agreement among local coordinators and the program coordinator. Once they were confirmed by both parties, the developed syllabi were immediately shared with participant students (Table 1).

Table 1: KDU 2019 Short-Term Study-Abroad Program (STSAP) Syllabus

Week 1	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
9:30 ~ 12:30	Workshop: Basic	Workshop: Basic	Workshop: Basic	Interview with Dental	Workshop: Effective	Language Practice

	Communication Skills for Dental Practitioners (1)	Communication Skills for Dental Practitioners (2)	Communication Skills for Dental Practitioners (3)	Practitioners	Communication Skills for Dental Professionals (1)	Post-interview report / oral presentation
14:00 ~ 17:00	Visit to Dental School and Hospital	Talk with 16 Student Dental Technicians of The Prince Philip Dental Hospital	Visit to Dental School and Hospital	Visit to <i>International Elementary School</i>	Visit to Dental School and Hospital	Talk with Adult English Learners in Hong Kong
18:45 ~ 21:45	<i>Meeting with local students</i>	<i>Meeting with local students</i>	<i>Meeting with local students</i>			
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	<b>Saturday</b>
9:30 ~ 12:30	Workshop: Effective Communication Skills for Dental Professionals (2)	Interview with Dental Practitioners	Workshop: Presentation Skills for Dental Professionals	Online interview with Dental Practitioners	Presentation and Feedback / Feedback on Written Report/ Reflective Journal	
14:00 ~ 17:00	Visit to Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	Visit to Dental School and Hospital		Visit to Dental School and Hospital	Visit to Dental School and Hospital	
18:45 ~ 21:45	Visit to Hong Kong University of Science and Technology					

**Grey background:** The module of *English proficiency development*

**Black background:** The module of *disciplinary knowledge/skill development*

**Italic:** The module of *cross-cultural social connections*

## EVALUATION

As for the evaluation of KDU STSAP 2019, this paper limits itself in its scope to reporting on a part of the evaluation processes that are currently in progress. This section covers the design of the evaluation processes and initial provisional findings made through the analyses of some selected data.

### Evaluation Processes

As the academia agree on evaluation as a key element of language curriculum design (Breen, 1987, in Nation and Macallister, 2010), the necessity of evaluation of a study-abroad program is also recognized among scholars (Keese & O'Brien, 2011) and "all of the actors in the program need either to provide input or be evaluated" (Keese & O'Brien, 2011, p.20). While no specific reference has been made to the timing of evaluation in previous literature, the author takes the position that the assessment processes of a short-term study abroad program start even in the design stage, continue through the promotion and operation stages, and end in the form of post-program evaluation. In the case of KDU STSAP, for example, information was gathered from the program coordinator (= the current author) in the form of his self-reflection on the confirmed syllabuses before the program started. He felt that the confirmed schedule and syllabuses of the study-overseas program might have a bit too much packed in for some of the participants. Later through a triangulation with other information sources, his initial impression was confirmed, though it was also found that the work-load was perceived differently depending on the students' personality and group dynamism.

For the current evaluation, systematically collected pieces of information and any opportunistically obtained verbal data were given equal status and analyzed in a qualitative way to inform the improvement of KDU STSAP. Below is the list of information sources that were utilized for the current program assessment.

- Daily email reports from students during the program
- Semi-structured post-program interviews with students
- Personal talks and email correspondences with students at the pre-, in-, and post-program stages
- Personal talks with university staff and official comments at faculty meetings
- Correspondence, in-person meetings, and online (Skype) talks with local coordinators
- Direct observations of program activities on selected days by the program coordinator

Among these information sources, *daily email reports* refer to reports sent by students via email to the program coordinator on daily basis. Every student had one day in charge as a reporter and emailed to the program coordinator, reporting on their daily activities along with a night-time safety check report for other participant students. *Post-program interviews* were done with students who volunteered to be interviewees in a response to a recruitment email from the program coordinator three months after the program. Out of the sixteen participants, four students volunteered for a one-hour interview to give their in-depth insight into the KDU STSAP.

### Evaluation Results

The triangulation of multiple data sources (daily email reports from students, personal talks and correspondences with students and local coordinators, and observations) confirmed that students were generally satisfied with their experiences of KDU STSAP. All the three modules were found to meet different needs of different students. For example, there were two students who were highly fluent in English and had at first been indecisive on their application to the program due to the requirement to attend the *ESP proficiency development* module. They decided to participate in the program because they were very much interested in the afternoon *disciplinary knowledge/skill development* module, where students were given opportunities to experience the educational practices at Hong Kong University. Their daily reports confirmed that they were excited to be experiencing the HKU dental education and that the morning ESP classes also satisfied them fully. The learning materials provided in the ESP classes obviously motivated them to engage in the English proficiency development.

The majority of the student participants, who were not so confident in their own English oral communication, were also found to be able to enjoy the *ESP proficiency development* module as much as the *disciplinary knowledge/skill development* module. Some of them actually experienced difficulty in understanding when they listened to lecturers describing and explaining things in English in the dentistry classrooms and hospital. Most of the program participants, however, had already acquired extensive disciplinary knowledge and skills, and these disciplinary resources balanced out their shortage of language skills. Thus, they felt fulfilled with their participation in the educational and clinical practices in Hong Kong. Helping hands with language problems were also given mutually among the participant students. During the hospital tour, for example, students who were less proficient in English often asked more proficient students to translate descriptions and explanations into Japanese so that they could understand fully. The students thus shared their existent linguistic resources with each other and actively and collaboratively develop their disciplinary knowledge and skills in this module learning.

Most of the students also seemed to have made strong social connections with local students and people in Hong Kong, as had been expected. The social bonds were successfully maintained even after they came back to Japan, mainly through social network service applications such as Line and WhatsApp. They established these solid connections through the evening *cross-cultural social connections* module of the program, where they took time and opportunities to talk and hang out with Hong Kong people so that they developed a satisfying friendship.

One noticeable issue emerged, however, regarding one of the background program objectives; '*active and collaborative engagement*', which were briefly touched on in the section 2.1. During the two-week stay in Hong Kong, some students had interpersonal problems among themselves due to their problematic management of collaborative work. The outline of this issue is, two students absented themselves from morning and afternoon modules on their eighth day in Hong Kong. They skipped the modules, saying to other students that they would take a sick day, but actually went to meet new friends or acquaintances they had made during this program. They believed the meetings were very important to them for their future social or academic life. Other students did not have a positive view of this way of taking a day off, avoiding the 'mandatory' modules of the program. This interpersonal conflict then affected the later collaborative learning in a negative way during and even after the program. This

episode was never brought up to light until the end of the program. It came to the attention of the current author during the semi-structured interviews with students after the program, when some interviewees mentioned it as an example of unsuccessful self-management and collaboration during the program.

All these positive and negative findings together raise the issue of difference and diversity in perspectives and skills among students. What participants see as fulfilling participation in a short-term study-abroad program, namely, what they want from a study-abroad program, can differ significantly enough to call for attention and consideration. The program coordinator and program curriculum designer need to be careful of the scope of their evaluation and consider a full range of aspects of the program design and operation, including affective and interpersonal aspects of group learning as well as participants' self-management skills in collaborative learning. In the case of KDU STSAP, the findings about the interpersonal issues that the participants experienced were shared with other university members involved in the program operation and discussed from various perspectives. The findings were thus fed into the design processes of the KDU STSAP 2020 in Australia (unfortunately, KDU STSAP 2020 was officially cancelled due to the corona virus pandemic while the current article was edited).

It should be mentioned lastly that the program designer and coordinator have other major considerations as well for the successful operation of a short-term study-abroad program, such as benefits of faculty-led program (i.e. a program accompanied by university academic staff) vs. non-faculty-led program (student-only group tour), and students' ownership of the program and activities during the program (Keese & O'Brien, 2011). Although these topics deserve extensive discussions, they would be out of the scope of the current paper due to its limited data provision.

## CONCLUSION

The current paper reported on the design and evaluation processes of the short-term study-abroad program in 2019 for Kanagawa Dental University students. The data triangulation for evaluation revealed that the participant students were overall satisfied with the multiple-module system of the KDU STSAP curriculum. They were able to enjoy a variety of learning opportunities as well as social activities and to take what they wanted and needed in a way that no single-module system might have made it possible. On the other hand, an affective and interpersonal dimension of collaborative learning emerged as an issue that deserves attention and consideration at the stage of designing a short-term study-abroad program. Since different students with different experiences and views of the study-abroad program spend time and learn together in an unfamiliar educational environment, the program designers and coordinators need to prepare well for plausible scenarios and possible actions and reactions to take care of this dimension. In particular, students might differ greatly in their experiences, skills and knowledge for negotiating their unfamiliar learning environment in a foreign country (Mukai, 2017) and some group dynamics can easily cause interpersonal conflicts and affective difficulties among the students. The reflection on design and evaluation processes in this study is expected to inform the establishment of a more systematic development cycle of the short-term study-abroad program.

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